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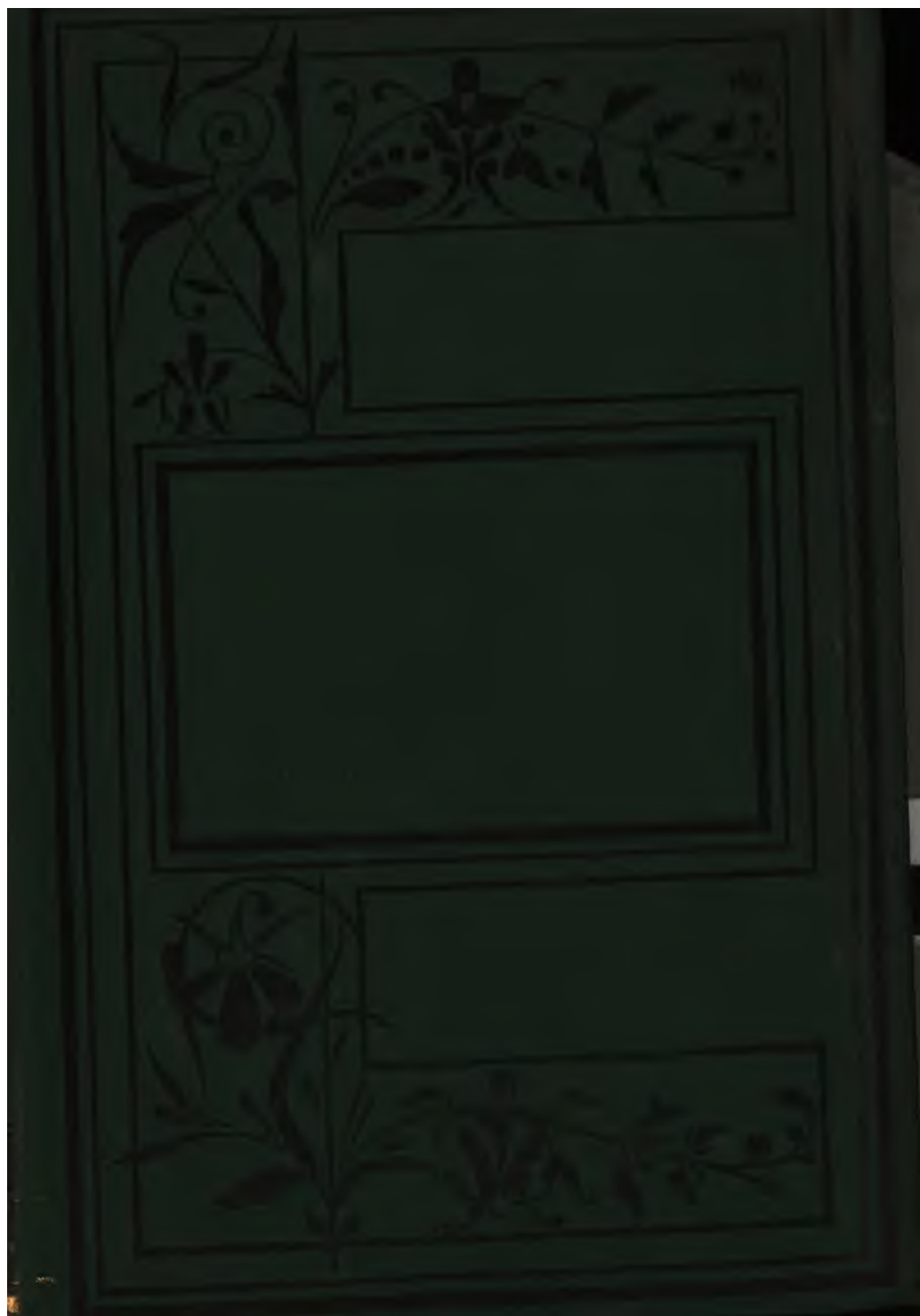
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# BREAD UPON THE WATERS.

A NOVEL.

BY

MARIE J. HYDE.



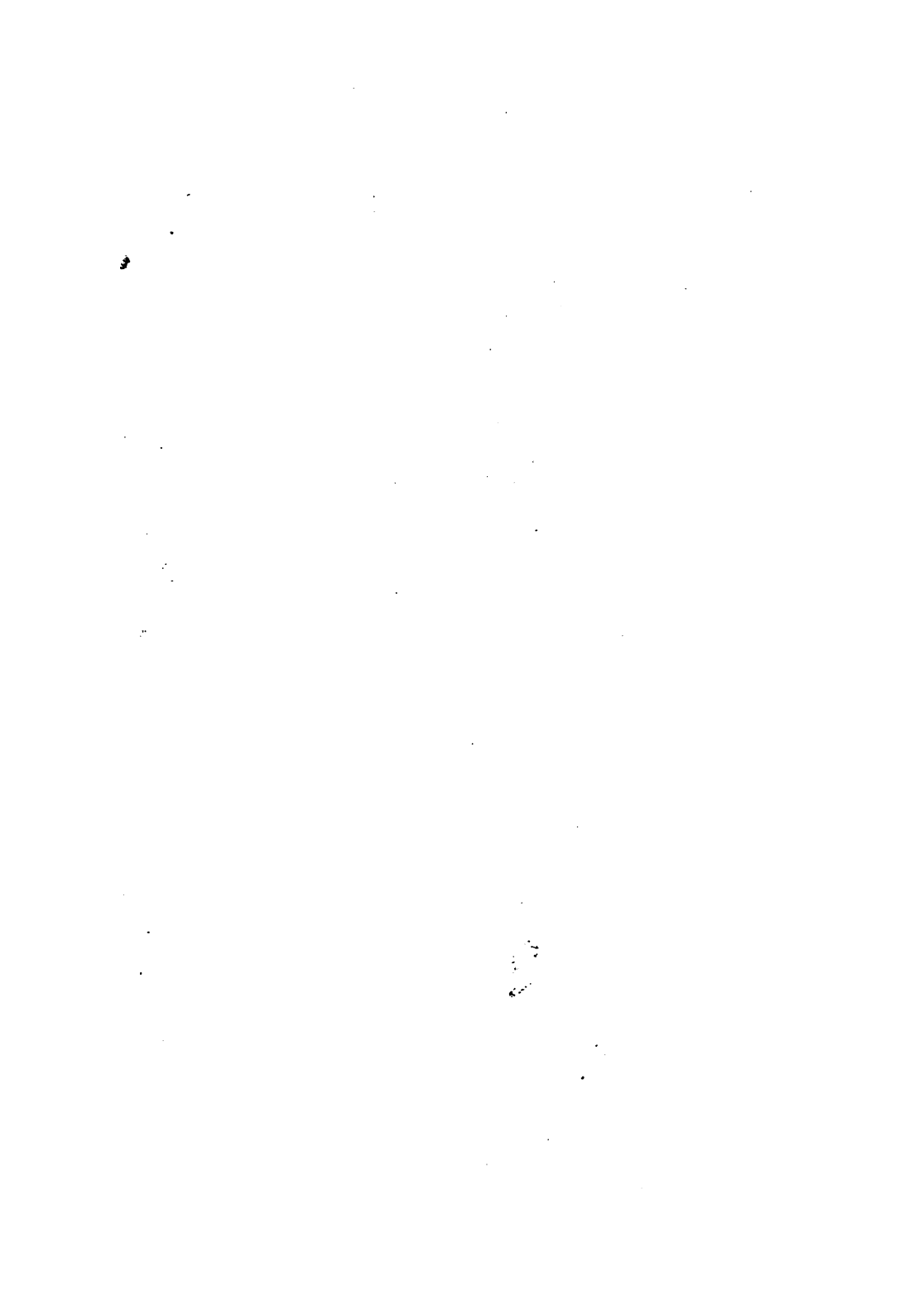
London:

SAMUEL TINSLEY,  
10, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.

1876.

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voice went on. "I should think you might have left that for me—ill as I am, too!"

"Mother!"—the crimson flamed up for a moment in the wan face—"I never touched a drop of it! you know that—you know I gave you the last this morning!"

"Oh, did you? Well, pray don't get so tetchy, child—there's no such thing as speaking a word to you!" and, drawing the scanty bedclothes round her with an injured air, the speaker settled herself as comfortably as possible, while the girl she had called Stella, reseating herself upon the stool, relapsed into the day-dream from which she had been awakened.

She was recalled again presently; once more the peevish voice broke in upon her reverie.

"Stella, isn't there anything left at all that you can sell, to get me a little beer?"

There was a world of scorn in the girl's face as her eyes slowly wandered round the bare little room.

"Beer—beer—always beer!" she murmured to herself, bitterly. "It used to be gin, before we got too bad-off to get it! If it wasn't for the everlasting 'beer,' we needn't be so poor as we are! Sell?" she added aloud; "yes, here's this stool I'm sitting on, and there's the bed, and that cracked tea-cup—oh! and my rose-bush—that's everything we have in the world! What shall I sell out of our abundance?" and the words were followed by a little mirthless laugh, sad indeed to hear from such young lips.

Suddenly her face lit up with a new expression, and she went across the room, and opened the window.

Outside, upon the ledge, stood a tiny rose-tree, which gave fair promise of future perfection, in a broken red flower-pot—a relic of brighter days, still carefully cherished by Stella.

"Oh! I do believe—yes, there is one out enough!" she exclaimed eagerly, as her eye fell upon a half-blown crimson rose, peeping out from the clusters of green leaves that surrounded it.

"What are you doing, Stella? Pray shut that window."

"See!" Stella went on, holding up the flower; "I will take it out; I can sell it for a penny, I daresay, and that will get us a penny loaf for tea."

"Tea! I don't want tea! Bring some beer in with it, Stella."

"I won't spend it for beer," said the girl, resolutely. "But I haven't got it yet, so we needn't quarrel about it," she added, seeing the fierce gleam in the sick woman's eyes, and fearful of the effect that any excitement might have upon a frame enfeebled by privation and intemperance.

"Can I do anything for you before I go, mother?" she asked, gently, as she stooped over the bed.

"No," was the sullen reply; "go along, and make haste back with you."

With a half-sigh Stella turned away, and taking up the rosebud and a few green leaves, she went her way, no instinct warning her that she was stepping on the threshold of a new existence.

It was late in May. The day was bright and clear, but very cold, and Stella shivered as she walked briskly along, for she wore nothing but a thin cotton dress and petticoat, all other articles of wearing apparel belonging to the poor child having disappeared long ago. For a long time Fortune seemed unpropitious. In vain Stella silently held up the tiny bouquet—for words she had none with which to importune the passers-by—for answer, she only received a quiet shake of the head, or else a disdainful stare; the latter cutting the girl to the quick, and causing the young head to droop with shame and humiliation. The wind was blowing keenly, and the poor little bare feet and arms were getting quite blue and numbed with the cold; she was faint—oh, so faint!—with hunger, and she began drearily to contemplate the possibility of having to retrace her steps without obtaining the means of procuring a mouthful of bread for herself or old Maggot.

"Old Maggot," Stella's only protector was derisively styled among the youth of both sexes who swarmed in the dark narrow street where Stella and her mother lived.



They had not always been so poor—so very poor—as they were now; Stella could remember the time when they lived in a decent tenement, in a much more respectable part of the town—to be sure, they only rented one room, but it was a large airy one—when Margot earned a comfortable living for both Stella and herself by her skill as a laundress.

That was before the “gin fiend” stepped over their humble threshold, and seized old Margot in his relentless grasp. At first he came seldom, and each yielding to the tempter was followed by a long period of sobriety and apparent repentance; then his visits became more and more frequent; and presently—as he always does—grim, gaunt Poverty followed in his wake.

At last, old Margot became a confirmed drunkard, and their slips down-hill were rapid indeed. Margot's dissolute habits lost her one situation after another; for a long time they were dependent on the money she earned by an occasional day's work at the laundry; then that, too, failed, together with Margot's health, for intemperance brought on disease; and at length, after a hard struggle with absolute want, they came face to face with it in a small, dreary garret, in one of the worst parts of London.

Stella had a mother only in name. Even at first, in those comparatively happy days, no gentle mother's eye watched over the gradual unfolding of the child's character—no tender mother-love met and answered the wealth of tenderness and affection that Stella longed to lavish upon her unresponsive parent. Margot's relentless indifference nipped, with icy hand, the clinging tendrils of the young heart that would fain have twined themselves around her: what wonder, then, that they drooped, and almost died, in the frosty atmosphere surrounding them?

Sometimes, indeed, it seemed as if old Margot could hardly bear the sight of the child she had reared—as if that child were an incumbrance, of which she would gladly rid herself, if she could. At such times her usual coldness and unkindness deepened into absolute cruelty, and imprecations, abuse, and—since

Margot had given herself over to the full power of the "gin fiend"—blows, fell unsparingly upon Stella's devoted head.

Thus forced back upon herself, with no outlet for the impulsive tenderness of her nature, Stella lived, the greater part of her time, in a new, beautiful world of her own—a world of reveries and day-dreams, of bright hopes and eager anticipations—a world in which there was no poverty, or hunger, or misery—in which the future was rose-tinted with happiness.

Those day-dreams of Stella's always irritated Margot exceedingly; and whenever she saw the child indulging in one of her "vacant fits," as she was pleased to designate them, she would roughly arouse her. "There you are again!" she would say, impatiently, seizing the child's arm and shaking her violently,— "doing nothing, and staring at nothing, like a born idiot! What a lazy, good-for-nothing little brat you are, to be sure! You shan't sit mooning there! Be off with you, out to play with the rest of the young uns, if you *won't* work!"

And Stella had to go—out of doors, at least; "play with the rest of the young uns," she could not; she shrank instinctively from intimate association with her fellow "Arabs"—grimy, dirty, ragged as herself, though scarcely so unhappy—there was nothing in common between her and them; she disliked them thoroughly, and they, in turn, repaid the dislike with interest. When forced into their society, "old Maggot's gal" had no pleasant time of it. Like some small Ishmael, though her hand was not "against every man's," every man's—or rather, every boy's and girl's—hand was against hers. As soon as she appeared, she was greeted with a storm of hisses, and sometimes with a shower of small stones or other missiles. Often she crept back to her miserable home, bruised and bleeding from the rough treatment she had received at their hands, only to be again assailed by Margot with a fresh torrent of abuse, and railed at as a "wretched little coward, who couldn't be trusted

out of her own sight for an instant, without getting into mischief."

Generally Stella bore the ill-usage to which she was subjected with entire submission; a long course of it had utterly cowed her, and she was just what she looked,—a timid, cringing, broken-spirited little creature, thankful when she happened to escape without a beating, and seldom giving utterance to any expression of resentment against her tormentors.

Never before, indeed, had she displayed as much courage as she had done during the colloquy with which our story opens, and her daring at that time was entirely owing to the fact that she knew old Margot was too ill to inflict the punishment with which such a rebellious exhibition of spirit would, otherwise, have certainly been rewarded—a knowledge in which Stella, though she was sincerely sorry for Margot's illness, secretly rejoiced.

---

## CHAPTER II.

### A WANDERING "STAR."

THE afternoon was waning. Stella had wandered into a more aristocratic part of the town, where the streets were broader and cleaner; and the girl's mournful eyes took quick note of the fact.

"I wonder how it is that our street is always so muddy," she thought; "I expect, though, it's because the people that live in it are all so poor. How nice it must be to live in such a place as this, where they keep the streets so nice and clean! It would be nicer to have a good tea, though—I'm so hungry! Oh dear! shan't I *ever* sell this rosebud, I wonder?" and the childish voice quivered almost despairingly.

In exceeding weariness, Stella held up her flower before the next pedestrian, who, as she thought, looked likely to purchase it.

Raising the light cane that he carried, the man struck savagely at the offending rosebud ; the blow fell upon Stella's fingers, and, with an involuntary little cry of pain, she let her treasure fall upon the pavement, almost under the feet of the man, who kicked it contemptuously out of his way, and, muttering a threat to "have the girl locked up," passed on out of sight.

Poor little Stella! the hot tears rushed to her eyes, and her lips quivered pitifully, as she stooped down to rescue the flower from the heedless, trampling feet that were hurrying along the pavement. Too late, alas! the slender stem had snapped in two, about half an inch below the head, and Stella's last hope had vanished. "Oh! what shall I do? what *can* I do?" she said, in utter dismay. "Nobody will buy it now; it is spoilt—quite spoilt!" and, exhausted by cold and hunger, she leaned against a lamp-post, and wept bitterly.

Curious eyes looked at her as she stood there, deep, anguished sobs shaking her whole frame; and one passer-by, more tender-hearted than the rest, stopped, and kindly asked the weeping girl what was the matter.

For all answer, Stella pointed, in mute despair and agony, to the symbol of her ruined hopes—to him, it was only a broken rosebud, and, as such, unworthy of a moment's consideration.

"What! crying like that over a flower? For shame! What a great baby you must be!" he said, reprovingly. And he, too, passed on, leaving her to her grief.

Courage, Stella! the darkest hour is just before the dawn.

Presently she heard the quick sharp click of horses' hoofs upon the gravelled road, and, looking up through her tears, she saw two gentlemen on horseback cantering rapidly towards her. Young and tolerably handsome both were—one with a bright laughing face, fair curling hair, and a fair, but not effeminate complexion; not at all a weak face—the firm red lips and mischievous blue eyes held a certain power of their own; just now, however, it was a latent power—they were brimming over with fun, as he bandied jests with

his companion, a dark-eyed, dark-haired, earnest-faced young fellow, Marmaduke Langley by name, and the son of the younger brother of Sir Roderick Langley, of Helstone Priory, with only the life of a delicate cousin between himself and the heirship of the time-honoured title and broad acres of his uncle.

Marmaduke had travelled far and wide. In one of his trips on the sunny blue Mediterranean, Count Vladimir Sadseldorf, a young Russian nobleman, who spoke English well, except for an occasional hesitation, had been his *compagnon du voyage*, and the two had struck up a friendship, all the firmer, perhaps, for the contrast in their appearance and character. The young count was now paying a long-promised visit to England and his friend, at the town residence of the latter.

Upon the afternoon in question, the two friends had started off upon an "exploring expedition," as Vladimir laughingly called it.

"Ah, Madame Langley," he said gaily, kissing the tips of his glove-fingers to that lady, as she stood at the window to see them ride away, "my prophetic soul warns me that we shall perform some wonderful feat—isn't that what you call it?—before we return. *Au revoir!*" They were laughing and chatting merrily when they caught sight of Stella.

"Ah! Niobe, on my word!" exclaimed Vladimir. "I told you so—here is adventure number one!"

"What a beauty!" said Marmaduke, as he reined in his horse beside the shrinking child.

"Which—the flower or the girl?" asked Vladimir. "If you mean the former, I agree with you, but, as to the other—well, she must alter considerably before I can conscientiously echo your exclamation."

"I didn't mean the girl—though she will be a beauty one day. Her eyes are magnificent."

Count Vladimir took a good look at the said "eyes." "Like a pair of saucers!" was his disdainful comment; "just about three sizes too large for the face!"

"Hush! she will hear you. What is the price of that floral treasure?" said Marmaduke, kindly, bending down to the child.

"Only a penny, sir; please buy it!" pleaded a soft, musical voice, and the "saucers" looked up shyly, through their long veiling lashes, into his face.

"Of course I will. What is your name, little one?" was the next question.

"Stella, sir."

"Stella!—a fallen star then!" said Vladimir, lightly.

"No, no!" said Marmaduke, more earnestly than the occasion seemed to warrant,—“not fallen—only wandered from its proper orbit!”

The young Russian turned away with a smile and a slight shrug of the shoulders, and amused himself by whipping the flies from his horse, while the conversation between the other two proceeded.

"Stella what?" continued Marmaduke, with a change of tone, turning to the girl, whose dusky orbs were raised wonderingly, first to one face, and then to the other.

"Stella Martyn, sir," was the reply.

An expression of intense pity swept over the young man's face as the answer to his next query—"Where do you live?" was given. He took out his note-book, and wrote down the address.

"I may come to see you some day—who knows?" he observed quietly, as he replaced the note-book, looking keenly the while into the girl's face, to see how the intelligence was received. But if he had felt any doubts as to her veracity, they were instantly dispelled by the look of gratification that overspread the tear-stained, sunburnt face.

Appropriating the rosebud, Marmaduke was about to place it in the buttonhole of his coat, when he observed its damaged condition.

"Why, it is broken—it has no stalk!" he exclaimed. "How is that?"

Stella flushed crimson. She was afraid that the flower was about to be returned on her hands.

"Oh, please, sir," she said, earnestly, again raising her pleading eyes to his face,—“please, sir, I couldn't help it! It wasn't broken before—but a gentleman knocked it out of my hand, and spoilt it.”

"A *gentleman*?" said Marmaduke, indignantly.

"Yes, sir—with his cane," replied Stella, simply. "Indeed, I couldn't help it! Won't you have it, sir? I'm so hungry!" and again the tears rose to the child's eyes.

"Have it? of course I will, my poor child!" said Marmaduke, depositing the poor little rosebud in the pocket of his riding-jacket for safe keeping. "There, don't shed any more tears now—here is something to buy you some supper;" and placing a coin in the girl's palm, Marmaduke rode off again, followed by his companion.

Stella stood as if rooted to the spot, gazing after them till they had disappeared; then she bethought herself to look at the coin in her possession. It glittered very much, and looked very yellow, in the cold, bright afternoon sunlight, and Stella looked at it again and again before she could believe the testimony of her eyes.

"A—a *sovereign*!" she whispered, breathlessly; and then, weariness, hunger, and cold all forgotten in the glad delight that thrilled her frame, the little bare feet twinkled rapidly along the pavement, on their way home to Margot.

As she sped along, Stella debated in her own mind the important question, whether she should buy some provisions at once, and take them in with her, or go first to Margot, with the news of her good fortune. Finally, an irresistible desire to exhibit the bright new sovereign to her mother made her decide upon the latter course.

"It won't hinder me above a minute," she reflected; "and I want her to know directly."

She scarcely felt the rickety old stairs as she bounded up them, two steps at a time. She had just reached the top, when the door of their miserable room was opened from the inside, and a tall, broad-shouldered, ruffianly-looking man appeared upon the threshold. The joyous exclamation upon Stella's lips was hushed, and she instinctively closed her fingers tightly upon her precious sovereign. She knew very

well that if the man once caught a glimpse at it, her treasure was hers no longer. She knew him at a glance, though she had not seen him for years, never since the far away time of their comparative respectability, when, sometimes alone, and sometimes accompanied by a boy, with very dark, flashing eyes, he visited them occasionally, always, when he departed, taking with him every farthing of Margot's earnings that he could lay his hands upon.

"Halloa!" he said, catching sight of Stella; "this is the brat, is it? Come here, young un, and shake hands with your dad."

With a deftly executed little bit of legerdemain, Stella transferred her treasure unobserved to her left hand, and placed her right in the coarse horny one held out to her by the man she had been taught to call father.

"Your mother says you are going to the dogs," he went on. "Is that true?"

"Yes, sir," answered Stella.

"What do you mean by that? Say, 'Yes, father,' can't you?"

"Yes, father," responded Stella, obediently.

"Pity you ain't a little handsomer!" muttered the man. "She might make money by you—get somebody to adopt you, and take you off her hands! Well, I always make it a rule not to waste my time where I can't get anything by it—so goodbye!" and he slouched down the stairs, and out at the front door.

Stella stole down and looked after him to make sure that he was really gone, then rushed upstairs again.

"See here, mother!" she burst forth, as she opened the door. "A sovereign—a whole, new, bright sovereign! Oh, how glad I am! I think we shall never want money again!"

"Can't you shut the door after you?" demanded Margot's voice from the bed. "That's right, bang it now, of course! there's no medium with you—and you can't be spoken to! Got a sovereign, have you? Well, you had better go and get me some beer directly, then."



Stella's grateful joy had made her soft-hearted ; so she said briskly—

"Oh, yes, you shall have some beer, mother; I'll bring some in with me—I can borrow a can at the Wedge."

"Well, look sharp, then!"

With her high spirits slightly damped, Stella "looked sharp" to the baker's shop, where she preferred her modest demand for "A crusty brick, please, ma'am—stale, if you've got it."

The "brick" was weighed, and placed upon the counter before Stella, who laid down her pretty bright sovereign as if very loth to part with it ; her eyes followed it longingly, as the shopwoman, after a quick, sharp glance at her customer, proceeded to ring, bite, and otherwise test it.

"What's your name?" she asked, suspiciously, convinced at last of its genuineness.

"Stella Martyn," said the girl, wonderingly.

"Stella Martyn—yes, but ain't you old Maggot's daughter?"

"Yes," said Stella, wondering when her questioner was going to give her her change, and let her go.

That, however, the sharp-eyed lady seemed in no hurry to do.

"Where did you get that sovereign?" was the next query.

"A gentleman gave it to me," Stella said ; then, giving a gentle hint that she was in a hurry, she added, timidly, "Please, ma'am, you haven't given me my change yet."

"I'll see about that presently. Who was the gentleman?"

"I don't know, ma'am;" and Stella wondered what difference it made to her interlocutor who gave her the money.

"Don't know! Well, what did he give it you for?"

"For a rosebud."

"Oh, yes—likely story that, very!" muttered the lady. "Come, tell the truth, there's a good girl—how did you get that money?"

Stella, more and more bewildered, repeated her assertion, that a gentleman had given it to her.

"You wicked child! don't tell me such stories as that," said the shopwoman, indignantly. "Here, just you stand still a minute—I must see to this;" and, opening the door communicating with a little room at the back of the shop, she said a few words in an undertone to a tall, shock-headed youth, who, muttering that she was "allus a findin' summat for folks to do," reached down a disreputable-looking "billy" from a peg, and cramming it down on his tangled red locks, took himself out at the front door, passing Stella—who was hungrily devouring the piece of bread that had been given her as "make-weight"—with a glare that might have made her tremble in her shoes, if she had possessed such articles, and, as it was, inspired her with an uncomfortable feeling of impending evil.

"Please, ma'am, I can't wait any longer," she said at length; "mother's ill, and I'm in a hurry—if you'll please give me my change."

"Then you'll have to wait," was the grim answer; "I'm not going to give you any change, till I know you came by that sovereign honestly."

"Honestly! I told you how I got it, ma'am," said Stella, with flaming cheeks. "Do you think I—I—*stole* it?"

"Never mind what I think."

"But do you, ma'am—do you?" asked Stella, earnestly, clasping her hands supplicatingly. "Indeed—indeed, I've told you the truth!"

"Oh, you persist in your story, do you? Ah, well, you'll have to wait for your change till you've proved it," was the shopwoman's ultimatum; and Stella was compelled to submit to her decree, however much she might rebel inwardly.

It seemed to Stella as if she stood in that little shop for hours; in reality, ten minutes had not elapsed since the departure of the red-haired youth, when he reappeared, accompanied by a gentleman clad in raiment of the peculiar hue usually patronised by members of "the force."

"See here," remarked the latter worthy, as he entered the shop, "you've got to come along with me, young un."

"Where?" asked Stella, in dismay, shrinking back as he was about to seize her hand.

"Never mind where! you've got to come, that's all; and you'd better come without making a piece o' work over it—it'll be all the worse for you, if you don't."

"Yes," put in the shopwoman, "it's plain enough she's guilty; she don't colour up like that, for nothing. Fancy! the cheek of the little cat! coming here, as bold as brass, with a sovereign, and then, when I asked her how she got it, making up a tale about a gentleman and a rosebud! As if I was going to believe such a story as that! Why, it bears a falsehood upon the very face of it! Gentlemen ain't so flush of their money—if she was a decent-looking girl, it would be different!" and the irate shopwoman turned up her nose in disgust at Stella and her freckles.

"Yes, ma'am," assented the gentleman in blue, turning one eye admiringly upon the lady, while the other kept watch over Stella; "you're quite right, ma'am, and very much to be commended in your conduct, which was very praiseworthy, ma'am. Where does the little gal live?"

"Round at the back somewhere," said the shopwoman, bridling. "I thought I'd better keep her here till you came; I knew it wouldn't be very pleasant for you to have to go round there after her."

"No, ma'am, that it wouldn't; it's as much as a bobby's life's wuth to show his face round there. None of us never goes round there, 'less we're sent for special, and can't help ourselves. As I said afore, ma'am, you've acted very praiseworthy, and I'm much obliged to you;" then, turning round to Stella, with a change of tone he added, "Are you a comin' along with me peaceable?"

"No," said Stella, trembling.

"Ah! you ain't, eh? We'll see about that;" and he drew from his pocket a pair of handcuffs, at sight of which Stella drew back in affright.

"Oh, no, no!" she exclaimed in an agony, "please, please don't put *them* on! I'll go without—I will indeed! I—I'll go anywhere!"

"Come along, then. Good arternoon, ma'am;" and, with a farewell blink of admiration at the sprightly shopwoman, the worthy guardian of the public peace went his way, dragging after him the frightened and reluctant Stella.

No sooner had the two made their appearance in the street, than a small crowd of young urchins, to whom Stella was well known, who had been lounging about the door, amusing themselves by watching the scene transpiring within the shop, set up a shout of "Hooray! the bobby's got old Maggot's gal! What a go! Ain't we glad, though?" then forming themselves into a sort of improvised body-guard, they "followed suit" with alacrity, some preferring their natural method of locomotion, others—and the latter were in the majority—getting over the ground at a rapid rate, by means of what we believe are technically denominated "wheels."

Thus escorted, Stella reached the end of the street, and they were about to turn down a broader thoroughfare that ran along the top of it, when she caught sight of two horsemen, who were coming leisurely along in the opposite direction. Hitherto she had made no effort to escape, and the policeman's vigilance had in some degree relaxed. She recognised the riders, and with a low cry of joy and relief she bounded suddenly forward, much to her guardian's astonishment. Taking a few lengthy strides, he overtook her again, and seized her arm in a firm grasp.

"You don't come none o' them games over me!" he said gruffly. "I'm used to them sort o' capers; so you'd better mind what you're at, I can tell you!"

Flushed and trembling with agitation, Stella glanced up at him.

"Oh! please let me go," she uttered, breathlessly.

"That's the gentleman that gave me the sovereign! Don't you see him?—that one on the black horse! Oh! they're going the other way; pray, pray let me go!" and the girl wrung her hands in agony, and gazed piteously at the officer's unmoved face.

"Here, that'll do! I've had enough o' that nonsense," he said, in grim disdain. "Let you go, indeed! When I do, you tell me on it, that's all! Don't you wish I'd do it? Guess I'd look fine at that little game. Let you go? I'll let you go, fast enough—on the way to the lock-up, and with me to look arter you;" and the gentleman expressed his appreciation of his own humour by a loud "guffaw," which was taken up and echoed, in various tones, by the members of the "body-guard."

"See there!" exclaimed Vladimir, catching sight of Stella and her captor; "there's something up—what is it, I wonder? Let's go and see—we are out in search of adventures, you know."

Marmaduke nodded acquiescingly, and the two put spurs to their horses.

"Niobe again, on my word!" added Vladimir, as they gained a nearer view. "You see, the star has fallen, after all!"

"Are you sure it is she?" asked Marmaduke, eagerly. "In a policeman's hands! What can be the reason?"

A moment later the officer's self-complacent cachination was cut short by a light touch upon the shoulder from Marmaduke's riding-whip.

"What are you doing with that child?" said the latter, sternly.

The policeman looked up at him with wide open eyes and mouth.

"Why, I'm going to take her to the lock-up," he said sullenly, when his astonishment had somewhat abated. "'Spose it don't make no difference to you?"

"Well, what has she been doing, then?"

"Stealin'," was the laconic reply.

"Stealing! stealing what?" and Marmaduke's inquiring gaze went over to Stella, who, released from

her captor's iron grasp, stood a little apart, with clasped hands and eager, beseeching eyes, awaiting the result of the colloquy. Quickly she answered Marmaduke's look.

"Oh, please, sir, I didn't! I haven't been stealing anything—indeed I haven't! It was that sovereign you gave me, sir. I went to buy some bread with it, and the lady in the shop, she asked me how I got it, and I told her you gave it to me; but she wouldn't believe me, and so she sent a boy for a policeman, and—and he was going to take me to the lock-up, only you happened to see us, sir! Have I got to go there now, sir?" added Stella, anxiously.

"Certainly not, my child. This gentleman has done with you now, I suppose?"

"No I ain't, though," remarked "this gentleman," in an injured tone, foreseeing a bribe if he held out, and determined, if necessary, to concoct some story to obtain it. "P'raps the gal's tale's true, and p'raps it ain't. Anyway, she's got to go afore a magistrate, and if it's true, she can prove it—and if it ain't, why she'll have to go to quod, that's all. I'm a poor man as can't afford to lose a case in that way, no how."

"Can't afford to lose the case?" repeated Marmaduke, questioningly; "even when—oh! I see now, I think. You get an advance of salary for 'a case,' I suppose?"

"No, sir, not egsackly; but we gets a trifle hextra for every case as we brings afore the magistrates; so you see, sir, it comes hard on a man to have a case pulled out of his hands just as he's got it."

"Yes, no doubt. What sum of money will represent the 'trifle extra' that you would get, if you dragged this poor child before a magistrate?"

"Eh, sir?"

Marmaduke repeated his question in a more intelligible form, drawing out at the same time a well-filled purse, at sight of which the eyes of the gentleman in blue twinkled with increased respect for its owner. He hesitated a moment, uncertain how high a sum he could safely mention as the "trifle hextra," which

probably existed only in his own imagination. Finally, however, he decided upon the amount, and Marmaduke handed him a counterpart of the gold piece he had given Stella.

"I suppose that will cover it," he said gravely. "You may keep what there is over as a kind of salve for any qualms of conscience that you may feel for having neglected your duty."

With a broad grin the officer pocketed the coin, and was walking off, if not a wiser man, at any rate a richer one, when Stella said, timidly—

"Please, sir, won't you make him give me back my sovereign that you gave me?"

"To be sure! I had forgotten that. Here you, sir, have the goodness to restore this child's property, if you please."

The man's countenance fell several degrees as he fumbled reluctantly in his pocket, and, still more reluctantly, returned the money to Stella.

Then Marmaduke turned, with a change of tone and expression, to the child, and gaily asked her if she "liked tarts."

"I don't know, sir," answered Stella, dubiously.

"Don't know, eh? Well, suppose we try? There are some shops about here where they sell them, I dare say."

"Oh, yes," Stella responded, with sparkling eyes.

"Jump up, then!" and, to Vladimir's intense amusement, a moment afterwards the wondering child was perched upon the saddle before her benefactor.

They stopped first at a pastrycook's, and after supplying the poor hungry child with a huge slice of cake, Marmaduke ordered a large paper bag to be filled with all sorts of nice things, which was done, and the bag given into Stella's charge. Then he chartered a strong-looking member of the "body-guard," which had not deserted Stella in her altered fortunes, and loaded him with an immense hamper, which he proceeded to fill with substantial provisions from various shops, laughingly advising Stella to "keep her eyes shut the while"—advice which, it is needless to say, she had

no thought of following; they opened, indeed, more widely than ever, as they saw a good-sized ham and a lot of potatoes walking into the hamper, in the train of the parcels of tea and sugar and other groceries.

By the time that hamper was filled and tied down, Stella was almost speechless with delight; and when Marmaduke threw over her shoulders a nice warm, soft shawl, almost enveloping her little shivering figure in its bright-coloured folds, only a glance from her dark eyes thanked him. But such a glance of delighted gratitude! Marmaduke's own eyes grew misty as he met it, and his face was grave until they stopped again—this time at a fruiterer's shop.

"Now you *must* 'open your mouth and shut your eyes, and see what I will send you,'" he said gaily; and Stella screwed up her eyes as tightly as possible, and waited till something cold touched her lips, then opened them upon a large orange. Both young men laughed as she started back in surprise.

"You see what befalls people who try to go through the world with their eyes shut," said Marmaduke. "Here, Count, you carry this," he added, holding up a small basket, which Vladimir received with an expressive grimace.

"It's lucky that nobody knows us about here," he observed. "Do you intend to pay a visit to every tradesman in the locality? Because, if you don't, I would venture a gentle suggestion, that it is getting near dinner-time, and your lady-mother will be wondering what has become of us."

"I won't trespass upon your patience much longer," said Marmaduke, with a smile. "I must just see my little charge safely home, and then I am at your disposal. Is there anything more that you can think of, little one?" he added, turning his horse's head in the opposite direction.

"Oh, no, sir, thank you," Stella answered gratefully; "nothing at all, unless—unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Marmaduke, kindly, as she stopped in half-frightened confusion.



"Unless, sir, you would please to stop at the baker's, and tell 'em that I didn't steal the money."

Which Marmaduke did—adding to that piece of information some valuable advice, as to their future treatment of the child.

"Now, good-bye, little one," he said, as he set her down at the entrance of the narrow court in which she lived: "I shall not see you again for some weeks, because I am going out of town; but I will come and see you when I return. Stay—can you read?" he added, taking out his card-case.

"Yes, sir!" with a little touch of pride in the voice, that brought an amused smile to the young man's lips.

"Very well, then, if you want anything before I see you again, come to that address. Good-bye!" and in another moment Marmaduke and his companion had vanished.

"Well! you haven't been gone long," was Mrs. Martyn's greeting, as Stella opened the door; "I should think you've been making the things! Where on earth have you been to?"

"To prison—nearly," responded Stella, dropping down upon her knees beside the hamper, which stood in the centre of the room. "But it doesn't matter. I'm going to have a splendid fire now;" and she threw a bundle of wood into the empty grate, with some coals to keep it company.

"Haven't you brought my beer?" was the next question, as the wood began to crackle and sputter in right merry fashion.

"No, mother; I'm going to get you a cup of tea, and then we'll have some supper."

"Ah, well! the beer must wait awhile," rejoined Margot, fretfully. "It's just like you, to forget it—you never can think of your poor sick mother! Tea! How are you going to make it, I wonder?"

"Borrow a kettle," said Stella, blithely; "Mrs. Lardale's had her tea by this time, and she'll lend me her tea-things, I daresay—I'll go and see, at any rate."

She was gone but a minute, reappearing with the

borrowed "tea-things" and a knife and fork. The hamper, after being emptied of part of its contents, did duty as a table, and with hearty good-will Stella set about her task of getting supper, telling her story between whiles.

"How nice it must be to be rich!" she said, musingly, as she sat toasting her feet at the fire after supper. "How I should like to be able to make other people as happy as that good gentleman has made me to-night!"

"Riches ain't everything," sagely remarked Margot, upon whose temper the good supper had exerted a mollifying influence; "they ain't happiness, for one thing."

"People can be happy, if they are rich, can't they?" asked Stella, gravely.

"Yes, I expect they can; but they very often ain't. Rich people have a lot of cares that folks like us know nothing about."

Stella was silent for a second, apparently revolving this consideration in her mind.

"Ah, but I should like to have the money, even if I did have the cares!" was her ultimatum. "And I'm sure we have a great deal of trouble that they know nothing about. None of their cares can be so bad as being so hungry as we are sometimes, and not knowing how to get anything to eat."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Mrs. Martyn, turning restlessly over in the bed. "Go and fetch me some beer, and then come to bed, and save the firing."

Stella obeyed, and was soon wandering in the Elysian fields of dreamland.

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## CHAPTER III.

## A YOUNG COQUETTE.

LEAVING Stella to her rosy dreams, we will now seek a very different scene,—a house in the most aristocratic quarter of the town; a large, elegant house, even the exterior bearing testimony, not only to the wealth, but also to the refined and cultivated taste, of its inmates.

In the spacious drawing-room, where the flickering firelight was struggling for mastery with the waning daylight, and succeeded in casting spasmodic shadows over the walls and furniture, were two ladies, one bearing the traces of nearly fifty years upon her placid face, the other had probably seen some sixteen summers. They were sufficiently alike to be at once recognized as mother and daughter. Both possessed a clear, dark complexion, black hair and eyes, and full lips, revealing rows of very white teeth; but there was a very great difference in the expression of the two faces, that of the elder denoting an unusually gentle and peaceable disposition, while the predominant characteristic of the younger one was pride.

Both ladies were dressed for dinner. The younger, Miss Sybil Langley, was not yet quite emancipated from the thralldom of the schoolroom, but she was allowed to join her mother and brother at dinner—a privilege on which she strenuously insisted, even when, as on the present occasion, the party consisted of more than themselves.

“What can be detaining them, I wonder?” remarked Mrs. Langley uneasily, after a prolonged silence.

“Oh, another of Duke’s whims, I daresay,” replied Sybil, without raising her eyes from the book which she was trying to read by the fitful firelight. “There’s no accounting for him, ever! It is a pity he can’t be a little more like other people.”

“Why, Sybil, I am sure——”

Mrs. Langley’s remonstrance was cut short by a

sudden peal of the door-bell; and, with a half-suppressed yawn, Sybil rose from the sofa upon which she had been reclining, and began to arrange the voluminous folds of her white muslin dress, in which occupation she was still engaged when the door was thrown open, and the absentees entered the room.

"Have we committed the unpardonable sin, Mrs. Langley?" asked Vladimir, gaily. "I throw all the blame upon your son's shoulders. Goodness knows I tried hard enough to get him home, but he was intractable."

"My shoulders are broad enough, that's one consolation," said Marmaduke, laughingly. "Come along, Count; we must get dressed, or cook will go into such a rage, that there will be no getting her out of it with any bribe less than a fortnight's holiday, and we can't afford that just now."

"What made you so late, Duke?" asked Mrs. Langley, when they were at length seated at the dinner table.

But Duke, who wore an absent, preoccupied air, was carefully helping his guest to soup, and did not seem to hear the question.

"You needn't talk to him, my dear madame," laughed Vladimir. "His head is still in the clouds, and likely to remain there, I am afraid. Any questions to which you require an answer you must address to me."

"In the clouds?" repeated Mrs. Langley, looking puzzled. "What has put him there, then? Where have you been, Count?"

"In the clouds—where I have left Duke, as I told you, Madame! In other words, we have been star-gazing."

"Star-gazing?" Mrs. Langley looked more bewildered than before.

"Yes; at least, Marmaduke has. I confess I have very little taste for astronomy, and therefore left him to pursue his studies alone, or nearly so."

"What *are* you talking about, Count?" demanded Sybil, with a pout of her rosy lips.

"Facts, Miss Sybil," said Vladimir, his blue eyes

gleaming mischievously. "I told you we were going out in search of adventures. Well, we rode on and on, out of our own region into that of the stars, and we met one which

*'Did wander, darkling, in eternal space,  
Rayless and pathless——'*"

"Will you talk plain English, Count?" interrupted Sybil, impatiently.

"Plain English is impossible, Miss Sybil; my head is still ringing with the 'music of the spheres.' If I am unintelligible, you must pardon me, and blame Duke, who rushed off headlong in pursuit of this wandering star. I had an idea that it was only a meteor," said the Count, with another shrug; "but Duke decided at once that it was nothing less than a planet; and, to judge from his looks, he is trying to discover the best method of reinstating it in the heavens. Duke!"

"Well!" said Duke, absently.

"It must have been a comet, now I come to think of it!"

"Hardly bright enough for that!" Marmaduke said, rousing himself from his abstraction. "What nonsense you are talking, Vladimir!"

"Am I? I beg your pardon;" and coming down from his stilts, Vladimir began to talk "plain English" to Sybil, much to that young lady's gratification; while Marmaduke, in reply to his mother's hopelessly bewildered "What *does* he mean, Duke?" gave her an outline of his afternoon's adventure.

"Just about what I expected!" exclaimed Sybil; "you are always doing something dreadful, Duke."

"Dreadful, Sybil? What is there 'dreadful' in helping a poor destitute child?" said Marmaduke, quickly.

"Why, of course, you might have helped her in a different way; you might have given her some money and got rid of her. Fancy, taking a girl like that up before you! I declare, I shudder when I think of it!" and, suiting the action to the word, Sybil executed a pretty little shudder, noting its effect upon their guest by a sidelong glance from her black eyes.

Young as she was, Sybil Langley was a thorough coquette, and a perfect mistress of all the little feminine wiles of smiles, glances, gestures, and other weapons usually found in the armoury of a coquette. She liked the gay young count, and she had determined, if possible, to conquer his heart. How far she had succeeded, was, however, very difficult to determine; Vladimir treated her with a mixture of gallantry and fun that left it quite uncertain whether she had passed the boundary dividing the interest that young men always feel in a pretty graceful girl from any deeper feeling.

As yet, Sybil had tried in vain to discover in what estimation she was held by the handsome young Russian; she had set all kinds of little subtle traps for his unwary feet, but those same feet had obstinately declined to become entangled; they had walked with careless easy grace straight over or through the elaborate meshes of the nets spread for them, thereby investing the prize with additional charms for the wayward girl; for the difficulties of the campaign only enhanced the value of the victory in Sybil's eyes,—a victory which she fully expected to gain, when the conventionalities of town-life should be exchanged for the greater freedom of the country, which would very shortly be the case, as they intended to pay their annual visit to Helstone Priory almost immediately. Count Sadseldorf, having received a cordial invitation from the old baronet, was to make one of the party, and Sybil's foolish little heart beat high with confident anticipation.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### STELLA FEELS RATHER OUT OF PLACE.

AT Helstone the weeks flew by on rapid wings. To Stella Martyn, in her dingy London attic, they were fraught with sorrow; for old Margot was gradually

growing worse. The parish doctor had been called in, but he acknowledged himself powerless to combat the inroads of disease. Had Margot possessed a good constitution, he said, he might have saved her, but, enfeebled as she was by dissipation, there was no hope.

Stella was as efficient a nurse as her youth and inexperience allowed her to be, and Marmaduke's timely aid enabled her to procure many little comforts for the sick woman; but all her care was unavailing; the fiat had gone forth—Margot must die! Margot received the doctor's verdict at first with utter incredulity, and then with overwhelming horror and dismay. *She* die! with no hope, no home beyond the grave! pass into eternity, with the sins of a lifetime heaped upon her head, and pressing her down—down—whither?

So she lay, trying to solve that question—trying to pierce the darkness and horror of the future—trying vainly and hopelessly, till there came to her bedside one of those “ministering spirits” who find their way into the gloomiest dens of vice and misery, holding in their hands the “glorious Gospel of the blessed God”—a sweet-voiced woman, with a mild, gentle face, and bands of silvery hair, folded smoothly away under her widow's cap—a woman who had evidently passed through the waters of affliction, and had come out of them purified and strengthened by their chastening influence.

Taking the weary hands that were blindly groping their way in the blank darkness, she led the dying woman, slowly, step by step, into the “narrow way that leadeth to life everlasting,” administering to the starving, benighted soul, crumb by crumb, and drop by drop, as she could bear them, the bread and water of life, pouring into the ears that were fast closing to all earthly sounds some of those “exceeding great and precious promises” so calculated to soothe and comfort all who yield to their influence.

At last, towards the close of a balmy September day, the end came. Margot had been dozing for some time, and Stella, hushing her sobs, lest they should disturb her, was weeping bitterly, though silently.

Harsh though she had been to her, Margot was all she had to love—all the protector the poor child had, and the idea of losing her was terrible.

"Stella!" said a low voice.

Margot had grown marvellously gentle of late. Dashing away her tears, Stella looked up, eager to ascertain in what way she could be of service. Even to her inexperienced eyes there was a change in Margot's face; plainly, the death-angel was hovering very near her, and with an irrepressible cry of fear and awe, Stella stood motionless, gazing at the white face on which he had set his unmistakable seal.

So absorbed was she, that the door opened, and a light footfall crossed the room unheard by her, not by Margot; the heavy eyes of the latter rested with a gleam of satisfaction upon the pale sad face of "the Bible-lady"—that being the only name by which they knew her.

"It is well you are here," Margot observed calmly. "You have come in time to see me die!"

"Yes," answered the visitor, softly; "I apprehended this; therefore I returned. I will read you some comforting words, friend Margot."

"Presently," returned Margot; "I have something to do first."

"Nothing can be of such consequence, dear friend, as——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted Margot, restlessly; "but I couldn't die with *that* on my conscience! Stella!"

"Yes, mother." With a terrible effort Stella kept her voice calm.

"Lift up that board there, close by the wall—the one that is loose."

Stella obeyed, and brought to light a small square tin box, with the lid carefully soldered on.

"Yes, that's it. Now, Stella, if I give you that box, will you promise—promise solemnly—not to open it till you are twenty one?"

"Yes, of course, mother," was the wondering reply.

"Stay one moment," interposed the Bible-reader's quiet voice. "Friend Margot, before that promise is



given—do the contents of that box concern your child's future in any way? If so, it ought to be opened at once."

Margot was silent a moment, evidently in great perturbation of mind; then her face brightened a little.

"No," she said slowly, "it does not concern *my child*. It is a confession of a crime that I committed long ago. I would tell you all now, but I dare not break my oath—oh! that oath—that oath!" she groaned. "Stella, promise!" And, kneeling down by the bedside, Stella promised solemnly, that no consideration whatever should induce her to open the box, or allow it to be opened with her knowledge, until she had attained her twenty-first birthday.

"My poor child, I've been very hard to you, haven't I?" said Margot, regretfully, laying her thin hand upon the bowed head. "Won't you forgive me, Stella?"

"Oh, mother dear, don't talk so! I've nothing to forgive!" and clasping the hand in her own, Stella kissed it passionately.

"Ah, child, it was the drink!" Margot said, in a low, gasping voice; and she turned to the "Bible-lady" with a look of mute entreaty. "Read now, please," she said then.

And, choosing such passages as were most suitable to the case before her, the lady read on, till Margot's eyes closed, and there was no evidence that she heard the words addressed to her. Presently they opened again.

"Oh! I'm going! Stella!" she gasped wildly; then came a few quivering breaths, and all was over.

With a low wailing cry of bitter sorrow, Stella threw herself upon the senseless form, raining hot passionate tears upon the cold white face, calling wildly upon the departed spirit to come back to her—not to leave her alone!

The "Bible-lady" watched her for some time, with tears in her own eyes.

"Hush! hush! my child; you must not—you will

be ill too!" she said at length; and gently unclasping the child's clinging arms, she took her upon her lap, and talked to her in her sweet, sympathetic tones, till Stella gradually became calmer, and slept at last, from sheer exhaustion.

"Poor child! Is there no one to take care of her to-night, I wonder?" murmured the kind-hearted lady. After reflecting an instant, she laid the child's light figure upon the bed, and stole softly from the room, and down the stairs, stopping at a door upon the lower storey, underneath which shone the feeble glimmer of a candle. Her gentle tap was answered by a deep-toned "Come in!" and availing herself of the permission to enter, she found herself in a small, poverty-stricken room, almost as bare of furniture as the one she had just left. A little round deal table, as white as soapsuds could make it, stood in the middle of the room, and beside it, at work upon some coarse material, sat an elderly woman, who looked up inquiringly as her visitor entered.

"Mrs. Martyn is dead, friend Lardale," said the latter, gravely.

"Indeed! I thought she couldn't last much longer," replied the woman. "The child 'll have to go to the workhouse, I s'pose?"

"I hardly know at present; I shall be able to do something for her, in a day or two, I hope; but I want you to look after her until we see what can be done in the matter. As to the funeral——"

"The parish 'll see to that, I s'pose?" put in Mrs. Lardale, bluntly. "And as to the child—you know, ma'am, it'll be a good bit o' trouble, and some expense, too."

"Yes, of course; I know that, friend Lardale; and I know, also, that you cannot afford to take it upon yourself. I will take care of that, if you will take care of the child—here is a trifle to seal the bargain. Farewell, friend! You will see me to-morrow, if all be well."

But the morrow came and went, and many days after it, and no "Bible-lady" appeared. Margot had

been interred by "the parish" long ago, and Mrs. Lardale was anxiously debating in her own mind the advisability of sending Stella to the workhouse, when, one afternoon, late in October, an imperative double knock, that made the old door tremble, resounded through the house. The widow started up all in a tremour.

"Gracious me! child," she said hastily, "who can it be? Pray, make haste and open the door! Stay, though, I'll go myself;" and, apprehending she knew not what danger, Mrs. Lardale cautiously opened the door, to be confronted by a tall, dark figure, on horse-back, who, in the fast gathering October dusk, looked gigantic enough to alarm a person of stronger nerves than Mrs. Lardale.

"Stella Martyn—does she live here?" asked the stranger.

"Oh, yes, sir. Dear me, how you startled me! Won't you come in, sir?" said the widow, bobbing a low curtsy; for she saw at once that her visitor belonged to a higher class than her own.

Stella looked up nervously as the two entered the room where she was sitting, but a quick glance at the stranger's face changed the expression of her own to one of intense pleasure, and springing up, she advanced a step, as if to welcome him, and then stood motionless in the middle of the floor, her dark eyes glowing with delight.

"Well, little one, I told you I would come and see you, you know," said a pleasant voice. "Have you lost your tongue, now I have at last kept my word?"

"No, sir," Stella answered shyly; and then, as if she thought it incumbent upon her to perform the ceremony of introduction between her two friends, she added, "It's the gentleman that was so kind to me, Mrs. Lardale."

"Marmaduke Langley is my other name," the gentleman observed, with a smile. "How have you been getting on in my absence, little one?"

But that question brought a strange shadow of pain to the girl's expressive face, and Mrs. Lardale answered

for her: "Badly enough, poor child! Her mother's dead, sir—died some weeks ago—and she's been living with me ever since. I can't keep her much longer though—I expect I'll have to take her to the work-house."

"No," Marmaduke said quickly, "she must not go there! Tell me about it, if you please, Mrs. Lardale."

And the rough, but kindly-hearted woman related Stella's simple story, during the recital of which Marmaduke formed a sudden resolution.

"See here, little one," he said, "you must come home with me now, with your friend's permission;" and he bowed gracefully to Mrs. Lardale. "I will send you to school awhile."

"To school?" exclaimed Stella, breathlessly.

"Yes. Wouldn't you like to go?" asked Marmaduke, gravely.

"Oh, yes, sir, that I should!" was the emphatic response.

And Stella sat down again on her stool, her mental gaze full of the delightful vision thus suddenly conjured up; while Duke made all necessary arrangements with Mrs. Lardale.

Stella had no wardrobe to pack up; throwing the bright-coloured shawl—Marmaduke's gift—over her head, she stood before him ready equipped for the journey; and, after bidding Mrs. Lardale an affectionate farewell, she found herself in the place she had occupied once before, upon the saddle before Marmaduke. She had the little tin box safe in her pocket; her rose-tree she left behind, though it grieved her sorely to part with it; but she could not find courage enough to ask to be allowed to take it with her.

"Did you lose the card I gave you?" Marmaduke asked suddenly, as they journeyed along the crowded streets.

"No, sir, I haven't lost it."

"Then why did you not come, as I told you?"

"Please, sir, I couldn't," Stella said, timidly.

That was all, but it was enough—Marmaduke understood her perfectly, and asked no more questions.

How the tall footman stared, as he opened the door for his master, and saw him thus accompanied! A prolonged but suppressed whistle, and a telegraphic wink in the direction of the portly butler, expressed his astonishment, as the ill-assorted pair crossed the large brilliantly lighted hall together.

At the door of the drawing-room Marmaduke paused an instant to give the hand he held a reassuring pressure; then softly opening the door, he passed through, taking Stella with him.

At first, Stella's nervous eyes saw nothing but the luxurious velvet pile that her little bare red feet were pressing, and with which they contrasted so strangely.

What an incongruous little figure she looked in that handsome room—so utterly out of keeping with the air of refined elegance that pervaded it like an atmosphere! Their entrance was unnoticed for a moment; and gaining courage, Stella ventured to lift her eyes from the wreath of roses at her feet, and allowed them to take a quiet survey of the other occupants of the room.

A mild, dignified-looking lady, seated in an easy-chair by the fire, and looking over with benignant eyes to the piano, where a pretty young lady was playing the accompaniment of a popular song, and coquetting with a handsome young man, whose face looked familiar to the unseen observer—so much Stella saw, while Marmaduke, relinquishing her hand, made his way, under cover of the music, to the piano, and let his hand fall lightly upon his sister's shoulder.

The young lady wheeled round quickly.

"Ah, Duke," she said carelessly; "you are just in time to hear the Count's song. He has been rehearsing it; and he sings it charmingly, I can assure you. Why, Duke——"

The sentence ended in a little horrified shriek, and Sybil stared at Stella as if she were some newly imported wild beast.

"Duke, what—what is it?"

"It is a little girl, Sybil, as your eyes have probably already informed you," said Marmaduke, with diffi-

culty concealing his annoyance ; "and, moreover, it is a little girl whom I have taken under my especial protection. Surely you might afford her a more gracious reception than this."

"Duke ! what madness will you be guilty of next ? Taken that—that creature under your especial protection !"

"Really, Sybil ! Yes, I have taken the poor forlorn child under my protection, and I expect, Sybil, that you will treat her with consideration and kindness," returned Marmaduke, decidedly.

"Oh, indeed !" retorted Miss Sybil, mockingly. "Pray, what can I do for your young-lady friend, Duke ? Shall I show her to a room ? Of course a servant would not pay her sufficient attention, or I would ring for Mason to perform that office !"

Marmaduke bit his lip. How he contrived to keep his temper, no one but himself knew.

"Sybil, how can you talk so ?" he remonstrated, gravely. "Have you no spark of charity in your bosom, that you can treat a poor motherless child, whose helplessness alone ought to waken your sympathy, in this heartless way ? Come here, Stella," he added, "and show this wayward sister of mine that you are not so formidable as she thinks you."

Slowly, hesitatingly, Stella came forward, trembling with dread and agitation, for the young lady's disdainful words and manner had not been lost upon her. As she passed the music stool, Sybil drew her garments close around her, as if afraid they would come in contact with the shrinking little figure, and thereby become contaminated.

"Oh ! don't—*don't* let her come near me, Duke !" she almost screamed, shuddering as if in mortal terror.

"Sybil, this is worse than unkind," said Duke, taking Stella's hand, and drawing her to his side. "If you cannot bring yourself to welcome her, you might, at least, refrain from such an exhibition of repugnance as this ! But the child shall not annoy you any longer ; I will put her under Mason's care. She, at least, will know how to behave to a motherless child."

"Oh! pray don't preach, Duke! You are not cut out for it, I assure you," pouted Sybil; and running her fingers lightly over the ivory keys of the instrument, she turned to address Vladimir; but the young count, foreseeing a "scene" upon the introduction of "Niobe," had vanished.

Marmaduke paused, with his hand upon the bell-pull.

"I have no wish to 'preach,' or dictate to you in any way, Sybil," he said quietly. "But I am disappointed. Though I might have known better, I confess I hoped to meet with a sympathetic helper in my plans for the child's welfare. I hoped, too, that my little charge would find a friend in my sister. I was foolish, it seems, that is all. Probably I shall not make such a mistake again;" and Duke gave the cord a vigorous pull.

Hitherto Mrs. Langley had been a silent observer of this scene between the brother and sister; now she said, leaning forward, and drawing Stella towards her, "You must not be too hard upon Sybil, Duke. She is only a child, you know!" Which statement, strange to say, did not add to Miss Sybil's good humour. "You should have introduced your *protégée* to your mother, Duke. What is your name, my dear?"

"Gracious! what a name!" exclaimed Sybil, as the low-toned answer was given.

Stella's dark eyes flashed a look of mingled reproach and fear at the speaker. The child was beginning to dislike the young lady exceedingly.

"Be quiet, Sybil," said her mother. "What are you going to do with her, Duke?"

"With Sybil, mother? I must leave abler hands than mine to manage her."

"No, no! the child, I mean, of course."

"I thought of requesting the lady who took charge of Sybil's education, before you engaged Miss Mac Intyre, to undertake the education of my ward."

"Madame Oliphant? I am certain she will do nothing of the kind!" put in Sybil, scornfully.

"Why not?"

"Because she only receives well-born young ladies as pupils; she will not take your 'ward.'"

"She will receive her, upon my recommendation, Sybil," said Mrs. Langley.

"Upon your recommendation, mother dear?" said Marmaduke, joyously. "Do you mean that you will interest yourself in this case?"

"Certainly, Duke. I will write to Madame Oliphant at once. It will look much better for the affair to be in my hands, than those of a young man like yourself," she added smilingly.

"Darling mother!" Duke responded gratefully, lifting one of his mother's hands to his lips. "This is just what I wished, only I hadn't the courage to ask you. Why doesn't Mason come, I wonder? Oh, here she is."

A stout, motherly-looking woman, arrayed in her best black silk dress, and seeming, to Stella's unaccustomed eyes, almost as grand a lady as Mrs. Langley herself, now entered the room, with many apologies for her delay in answering the summons; and Stella was given into her care for the night.

"Don't you think, Mason, that you could find some clothes somewhere that would fit her?" said Duke, eyeing the child's dilapidated cotton frock.

"Yes, sir; there's plenty of Miss Sybil's, that she's grown out of—they'd do nicely, I daresay, Mr. Duke," replied Mason, apparently taking Stella's measure from head to foot.

"Very well, Mason; I give her into your hands then; she could not be in better ones, I am sure," said Marmaduke.

And, with a well-pleased smile at the compliment, Mrs. Mason took Stella under her wing, and withdrew to her own cosy little apartment.

"It's very well Duke doesn't want her to stay here," muttered Sybil, as the door closed after the pair. "I would soon have stopped it, though, if he had! I'd have made the house too hot to hold the little wretch very soon!"



Marmaduke might have reminded her that he was master in his own house, and that he certainly had the right of choosing his own guests; but he did not, though he heard the low-toned words distinctly.

"Mother dear," he said gently, "don't let your children's tiffs worry you. I will leave you awhile, Sybil," he added mischievously, "and send Vladimir to take my place. Perhaps *he* may succeed in getting you into a better temper by the time I return."

And Marmaduke left the room, followed by a parting shot from the enemy.

"You ought to have told me, Duke, that you were going to turn the house into a hospital, or an orphan asylum. I might have procured a white apron and a mob-cap, and prepared myself to enact the part of nurse! As it is, I'm not dressed for the character, you know; so I must be allowed to decline the *rôle*, with many thanks!"

Once more that night Stella saw Duke. He found her snugly ensconced in the housekeeper's-room, beside a glowing fire. Mason and her assistants had performed their task thoroughly, and effected a wonderful change in the child's appearance. She was arrayed in a soft, dark merino dress, a trifle too large for her, it is true, but that fault was hidden by a clean white pinafore. Her long fair hair was brushed smoothly away behind her ears, and done up in funny little plaits, tied with brown ribbons, revealing the white skin of her temples, where the hair had protected it from the united influences of the wind and sun—said influences having left their imprints, in the shape of tan and freckles, upon the rest of her face. She was engaged in contemplating alternately a wonderfully gorgeous picture-book with which Mason had provided her, and her own small feet, which now rejoiced in the unwonted luxury of shoes and stockings. Apparently her comfort suffered nothing by the alteration; for it was a happy face that looked up at Marmaduke as he entered the room.

Mason hovered near, her face beaming with smiles, waiting for her young master's approval.

It was expressed in a few gratified words, and Mason was happy.

"If you please, Mr. Duke—if I may make so bold—is the young lady a relation of the family?" she asked respectfully.

Stella opened her eyes at the term "young lady," as applied to her, and Marmaduke smiled a little, as he replied, "No; no relative—a ward of mine, that is all."

"Oh," Mason said. "And is she going to stay here, Mr. Duke?"

"Only for a few days, till we can provide her with a suitable wardrobe, and complete some other necessary arrangements; then my mother will take her to Madame Oliphant's establishment in ——shire."

Stella inwardly wondered what a "wardrobe" was, but concluded that it was something very good, or Mr. Duke would not let her have it.

"I think you told me you could read. Have you ever attended school?" Duke asked suddenly, turning to Stella.

"Yes, sir; once, for three weeks, I went to a ragged-school in the afternoons," said Stella, timidly.

"You must have made good use of your time, then," said Duke, smiling at her encouragingly. "If you do as well at Madame Oliphant's, we shall have to make a governess of you, when you have finished your education."

And Stella thought she should like that very much.

Presently Marmaduke departed, and soon afterwards an appetising little supper was brought in, which Stella shared with Mason—the latter seasoning the repast with various stories of "Mr. Duke's" boyhood, which delighted her auditor immensely.

Evidently "Mr. Duke" was a great favourite of Mrs. Mason's. She was never tired of expatiating upon his strength and courage, his physical, moral, and mental superiority over all other young men whom she knew.

"And I've known a good many, my dear; but his equal I never set my blessed eyes on!"

"Miss Sybil," apparently, did not stand quite so high in the good old lady's estimation.

"You see, my dear," she said, growing confidential under the influence of her sixth cup of Bohea, "for all they're brother and sister, they're no more alike than chalk and cheese, not a bit. Miss Sybil's more of a Langley than Mr. Duke; he takes after his mother more; his mother was a Thornton, you know—one of the Thorntons of Thornton Castle. The Langleys are very proud and haughty-like—Miss Sybil's a Langley, every inch of her. She's very nice and agreeable to her equals, they say—'very fascinating,' I've heard gentlemen call her a good many times—but she's haughty to people as she thinks below her. Of course it's quite right that she should be," added Mason, checking herself; "it wouldn't do for a young lady like her to make free with everybody; but still, I think sometimes she needn't carry it quite so high with old servants of the family, like me and Thomson—he's the butler—for instance. Not but what she's a nice young lady—but she isn't like her mother, nor Mr. Duke."

Which testimony Stella's experience of the evening fully confirmed.

"Mr. Duke, you see," continued Mason, who, once started on her favourite theme, never knew when to stop—"he isn't uppish at all, don't seem to have a bit of pride about him; and I don't know that anybody thinks any the worse of him for it. Nobody would ever think of taking liberties with him, though; with all his pleasantness, he's got a way of keeping his own place, and keeping other people in theirs, too. He's studying medicine now—going to be a doctor, he says. But, of course, he won't ever have to practise it for a living; only he said he was quite determined to have a profession to fall back on in case of emergency. That isn't very likely to come, though; for, though his father was only the younger son of old Sir Edward, he inherited his mother's fortune—a large one it was, too—and that has come down to Mr. Duke, most of it. Miss Sybil will have her mother's fortune, and that isn't

amiss. But, bless me, it's high time you went to bed ! How the time does fly, to be sure ! I declare, I mustn't say another word ; it's a wonder I haven't talked you off to sleep."

"Oh, I'm not a bit sleepy," said Stella. "Tell me some more, please, about Mr. Duke and his mother—she's nice, I like her very much."

"No, not to-night," returned the delighted Mason ; "I'll tell you more to-morrow, never fear. Come along. I'll show you the way to your room directly."

And then Stella was conducted to a bed, the like of which she had never even dreamed of, so soft, and downy, and fragrant with lavender was it.

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## CHAPTER V.

### CLEIGHTON AND ITS "CROSS."

THREE days elapsed, which Stella passed almost entirely in the housekeeper's domains ; Duke and his mother having decided, in the conference which they had held respecting her, that, as Sybil had apparently taken such an aversion to her, they would best secure her comfort by leaving her in Mason's care.

The evening post of the third day brought a letter from Madame Oliphant, containing an assurance of the writer's willingness to receive any pupil upon Mrs. Langley's recommendation, and expressing a hope that the young lady who was about to become an inmate of her house would profit as much by the advantages offered her as "dear Miss Sybil" had done.

The immediate result of this was, that Stella next morning found herself, accompanied by Mrs. Langley, whirling along in a first-class railway carriage, in the direction of Cleighton, a neat, quiet little town, about fifty miles distant from the metropolis.

Stella had never been in a train before, and her

pleasure at the novelty of the thing was qualified with alarm; for never did engine scream, and whistle, and snort, and puff, as did that particular engine on that particular morning. She had been in a perfect trance of delight—none the less intense because it was quiet—since the evening when she had left her old home; and she sat looking out of the carriage-window, hardly able to believe that she was not dreaming, and half afraid that she would wake up and find herself still sitting on the old stool beside Mrs. Lardale's tiny fire, till the tall steeple of Cleighton Church—a steeple of which the inhabitants were justly proud—flashed past her; and a moment after, all was bustle and confusion, and she stood upon the platform, and watched the porters dragging the trunks containing her “wardrobe” from the luggage van in which they had made the journey. At first she felt somewhat alarmed lest the shrieking monster should suddenly start off again, dragging her “wardrobe” with him, and a sigh of relief escaped her when the last box was safely deposited upon the pavement. A minute later, and she was in the only ’bus that Cleighton possessed, on her way to Madame Oliphant’s “establishment.”

Cleighton boasted three principal streets, High Street, West Street, and South Street, the two latter branching off on either side of the first, which, passing on, was, for some mysterious reason or other, no longer dignified by the title of “street,” being known as “Belmont Road.” In the centre of the square formed by the four cross roads stood the famous Cleighton Cross—a quadrangular edifice, ornamented with grinning satyrs, and enshrining in its niches the stony effigies of a couple of grim-looking monks, and an equal number of even more grim-looking nuns—built by somebody—nobody knew exactly who—in some far-back, hazy, historical period, that nobody cared to know anything about; that is, that nobody *used* to care to know anything about; for of late Cleighton had been looking up in intellectual matters wonderfully. At least, two “Mutual Improvement Societies” had been set on foot, and “introductory lectures” to

almost every science under the sun that ends in "y" had been given. They hadn't got any farther than the "introductory" ones, though; but, of course, that did not matter—"Rome wasn't built in a day," as the promoters of the "mutual improvement" movement sagely remarked at their first annual meeting.

The proprietor of the principal bookseller and stationer's shop in Cleighton, being of an adventurous turn of mind, started a newspaper, which was published on the market day. It proved a paying concern; for everybody felt bound to support it, because everybody wrote for it, from the nursery gardener, who made "Floral and Agricultural Notes," and who, in the spring, published the interesting and astonishing fact, that "everything that grew was progressing," to the more aspiring "correspondents" who carried on remarkable controversies in its columns, upon "High-way Rates," "Infant Baptism," "Vaccination," or any other "ism" or "ation" that happened to turn up; when the paper-war waxed so fast and furious, that both sides generally lost their temper, and became so extremely personal in their remarks, that the editor was usually compelled to interpose with an autocratic sentence, to the effect that "no further discussion could be permitted upon *that* subject!" Still another and a higher class of contributors had the "Cleighton Record," who wrote learnedly upon literary and scientific subjects, and who invariably put the titles of their effusions in the form of an interrogation, and then devoted a couple of columns or so to answering it to their own satisfaction, and, more or less, to that of other people.

One of these literary gentlemen—who occasionally wooed the muse, and appeared in the corner of the "Record" devoted to "Original Poetry"—happening to be possessed of an enquiring disposition, had lately stumbled over some old musty scrap of parchment concerning the venerable Cross, and this having whetted his appetite for antiquarian lore, he had taken to foraging among the ancient records of the town, poring over damp, mouldy, unwieldy tomes, the mere sight of

which made one feel uncomfortably chilly ; deciphering old, time-stained, unhealthy-looking, earthy-smelling bundles of almost illegible MSS., and pondering "over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore."

But the time of his reward came, and the result of his researches appeared for many weeks in the "Cleighton Record," in the form of a poetical "History of Cleighton Cross;" and the author, who modestly, but vainly—for had he not, in confidence, whispered the proud secret to half a dozen bosom friends?—tried to hide his identity under the innocent-looking *nom de plume* of "Bennie," was the hero and idol of Cleighton.

True, there were a few "carping critics" who hinted that "Bennie" had probably drawn upon his imagination for the "facts" therein set forth; but they, of course, belonged to the class of "ignoramuses" abounding in Cleighton, who were not at all likely to emulate the author, and follow him through the mazy intricacy of dusty documents in which he had so perseveringly led the way, in order to justify their assertions. Not they, indeed! Every one of them would, as the burly landlord of the "Red Lion" remarked, "rather believe it than go and prove it." And this being the case, and the "History," notwithstanding, achieving such an extraordinary success, that the editor of the "Record" considered himself justified in afterwards issuing it in the form of a sixpenny pamphlet, "Bennie," in his newly fledged glory, could afford to despise their sacrilegious insinuations, and the envious allegations of a few others, who, never having arrived at the dignity of an insertion in the "Original Poetry" department, flung little sharp-edged pebbles of spite at the rising young genius, in the shape of the smiling observation, accompanied by a significant shrug of the shoulder—"Very good! very good, indeed, my dear sir, for such a young man; but have you noticed how defective the rhyme occasionally is, and how sadly the metre halts?"

"Bennie" was in the zenith of his fame at the

time when Stella made her *début* at Sylvester Hall, as Madame Oliphant's "Establishment for Young Ladies" was somewhat imposingly styled in the annual "prospectus" issued by that lady.

Sylvester Hall was situated in South Street, and, as said "prospectus" set forth in glowing terms, enjoyed the combined advantages of a residence in town and the salubrious breezes of the country. That the Cleighton breezes were "salubrious," there could be no doubt. Never was there such a clean, pretty, healthy little town, in spite of the fact that it had no Board of Health to issue sanitary regulations and pry into the condition of its gutters, which, though uncovered, never emitted any offensive odours, and which ran down each side of each street, between the road and the sidewalk—the latter being elevated about two feet above the level of the street, to the imminent risk of people's limbs, when they wanted to cross the street in a hurry.

Didn't the small progeny of the Cleightonians delight in those gutters! especially after a heavy rain, when the water rushed down them till they looked like miniature rivers, and the "young uns" made whole fleets of paper boats, and launched them upon the rapids, where they floated triumphantly, till they either got saturated, and sank ignominiously, or else came to grief upon a sharp pebble that happened to partially block the bed of the stream.

Healthy? Yes, indeed! Cleighton was healthy, if it could not boast of the other two qualities promised in the old proverb to those who go "early to bed," and who are willing also "early to rise."

Not that Cleighton was neither "wealthy" nor "wise." As to the latter, as we have said, the inhabitants of the quaint, picturesque little country town were improving in some degree; and with regard to wealth, Cleighton was not so very badly off in that respect. There were a few rich people—the banker, who lived in the large white house, standing in its own grounds, at the bottom of High Street, and screened from the sacrilegious gaze of promenaders by a row of young trees,



inside the iron railings—the retired draper, who had made a large fortune in his business, and who occupied another white house, but a smaller, and much prettier one, in the Belmont Road—and the lawyer, who lived in a great, square, heavy-looking red-brick edifice, that always reminded one of a gaol. These, with the vicar, and three doctors—who all had private incomes, or else they must have starved, so little had they to do—were the great people of Cleighton.

These, too, attended church, and thought themselves many “notches” above the next strata of Cleighton society, which consisted mainly of comfortable, well-to-do shopkeepers, who were mostly Dissenters; and these, again, looked down on the mechanics and artisans in the next grade, who, in turn, felt excessively respectable when contrasted with the agricultural labourers, who formed the lowest step of the Cleighton ladder.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### AN UNFLATTERING RECEPTION.

STELLA’S heart beat painfully as Mrs. Langley and herself were ushered into the small, prim, starched-looking drawing-room at Sylvester Hall, by a rosy-cheeked young woman, who looked tolerably clean and tidy, considering that she was just then the only maid in the establishment, the cook having taken herself off the day before, in a “huff,” because her mistress refused to allow her—the cook’s—best pocket-handkerchiefs to be washed with scented toilet-soap.

Madame Oliphant, having kept her visitors waiting the regulation time, which varied, according to their social status, from three minutes to a quarter of an hour, at last made her appearance. She was a tall, well-preserved woman of fifty or thereabouts, with pale gray eyes and brown hair, which she wore gathered

into a knot at the back of her head, and falling in a row of short fat curls over her forehead. Her teeth, perhaps, were rather suspiciously white and regular; but in other respects Madame Oliphant was in no wise indebted to artificial aids, not even to the rouge-pot, for the colour, like that of a winter apple, upon her still fair cheeks.

In her youth she had been considered a beauty; and she had married, while very young, the Rev. Wilson Oliphant, a man fifteen years her senior, and pastor of the Baptist church, or chapel, at Cleighton.

His talents, however, were not of a very brilliant character; and as time wore on they lost what lustre they had ever possessed. His congregation melted rapidly away; but he still maintained his post, and preached—and preached, with undiminished zeal and dulness, until he had preached everybody out of the chapel, except his deacons, who considered themselves bound, as one of them said, “to stick to it till the last!”

How long “the last” would have been delayed, if two of these deacons had not suddenly awoke from their lethargy, and discovered that it was “high time, you know, Mr. Smith, that something was done—high time!” must remain a matter of conjecture, since the discovery *was* made, and a “church-meeting” called upon the strength of it—a call, however, which was only obeyed by the four deacons; for, alas! all the other members had migrated to a rival chapel of nearly the same “persuasion”—that is, if a *chapel* can be said to have an opinion of its own on religious subjects.

The “church meeting,” however, took place; and the deacons, after a solemn conclave, decided that, as matters had arrived at such a state, some effectual measures must be taken at once; and thereupon Mr. White, a very small man, with a very small voice, timidly asked, “What measures?”

“Mr. White!” responded the deep, profound bass of the big, broad-chested Mr. Brown; “Sir! can you ask that question? One cause only has brought this

trouble upon us; there can be but one remedy—our pastor must resign! Yes, though I grieve to say it, after sitting under him so long, Mr. Oliphant is not the man for this place, and he must resign!”

“But suppose he won’t?” was the next suggestion, in Mr. White’s meekest tones.

“He *must*, sir!” was the rejoinder, from the lowest depths of Mr. Brown’s chest; and, overawed, Mr. White shrank into silence.

Perhaps Parson Oliphant took Mr. Brown’s view of the case; for, after not a little altercation upon the subject, he eventually sent in a formal resignation of the pastorate, which was as formally accepted. But so greatly disgusted were Mr. and Mrs. Oliphant by the whole affair, that they mutually agreed that they would “never set foot in the place again, never!” and they had “gone to the Wesleyans” ever since—which means that they now attended Divine worship in the Wesleyan chapel; for Mr. Oliphant wisely concluded that he was too far advanced in years to seek another pastorate, and determined to settle down, and live upon his means; which, though at first not very considerable, were soon handsomely supplemented by the earnings of his wife, who, adopting the title of “Madame,” in place of her own rightful but humbler-sounding prefix, “Mrs.,” established a boarding-school for young ladies, and by skilful management became so successful, that her establishment was ere long *the* school, *par excellence*, of Cleighton.

Madame Oliphant won Stella’s liking at first sight, by the kindly way in which she took her hand and made inquiries about her welfare. Poor desolate child! she had been unloved and uncared-for so long, that her little heart went out with a rush of warm affection to those who now spoke kindly to her, and who seemed to look upon her with as much interest as if she belonged to their own station in life.

Marmaduke Langley and his mother she almost idolised; and when the time came for the latter to depart, she wept so bitterly, that Madame Oliphant was almost alarmed at the vehemence of her grief.

A long time elapsed before she was sufficiently composed to be introduced to her fellow-pupils; and when she at last entered the music-room, where the other girls, according to their usual custom after the day's lessons were over, were assembled, her eyelids were still almost red enough to justify the remark of Belle Ashleigh, who whispered to her especial *confrère*, Lucy Clinton, in a pretended *aside*, sufficiently loud, however, to be heard by all—

“Gracious! she looks like an inebriated owl!” an observation which, though not fully understood by the new-comer, strange to say, entirely failed to reassure her in any degree.

“For shame, young ladies!” said Madame Oliphant, sternly, as a smothered laugh ran through the company at this sally of Miss Belle’s. “How often must I tell you that I will not sanction such rudeness? Are you English girls, who have been under my tuition for some time, and yet know not how to treat a stranger with courtesy?”

There was a sudden demand for pocket-handkerchiefs, as the girls tried—some of them ineffectually—to choke back the laugh, and Miss Belle blushed crimson, for she had for the moment quite forgotten Madame’s presence, and the remark was by no means intended for that lady’s ear.

Very timidly Stella crept into the seat pointed out to her. And after another injunction to the other girls to treat her properly, Madame Oliphant departed.

Apparently their ideas of “proper” treatment differed slightly from Madame’s; for, as if by mutual consent, they sat for some time in perfect silence, only staring at their new companion as if she were some freshly imported curiosity from the Sandwich Islands, and they had paid so much a head for the show.

Under the fire of so many eyes, Stella grew nervous, and so much embarrassed that she dared not lift her own from the floor.

“Well,” commenced Miss Belle at length, “I think the Quaker’s meeting has lasted quite long enough. The spirit moves me to do the polite to our young

friend! What do you think of Cleighton, Miss—ahem! I really have been so remiss as to forget your name already.”

“Let me see, what was it?” murmured Lucy Clinton, as Stella did not seem likely to come to the young lady’s relief. “A ‘fowl of the air,’ I know, though! Sparrow? Sparrow?—no, that wasn’t it! Swallow?—no! Ah, I have it!—Martin—Miss Martin!”

Miss Belle bowed, and graciously thanked her friend for the information.

“Miss Martyn, may I have the honour of asking what kind of an impression the picturesque scenery of Cleighton has made upon you?”

The question might have been asked in Hebrew, for any answer that Stella vouchsafed. It would, indeed, have been quite as intelligible to her in that language. She was utterly bewildered, and her tormentors saw it with infinite satisfaction.

“Lost her tongue, perhaps!” exclaimed another girl.

“No. Perhaps she doesn’t understand English. What is your native language, Miss Martyn?” asked Lucy Clinton, gravely. “Perhaps we can muster a few words of it between us—enough to make ourselves understood.”

“Chimpanzee, I should think!” exclaimed Belle; and another peal of laughter marked the general appreciation of her wit.

“Ah! then I’m afraid we shall have to give it up,” murmured Lucy, regretfully. “Can’t you say a word of English, Miss Martyn? Try now, do!” and Lucy dropped down upon one knee before Stella, and looked up persuasively into her face. “You *can* speak, can’t you, *ma belle*?”

“Yes,” answered Stella, timidly, and as if only just now aware that she was the person addressed.

“There! I told you so!” exclaimed Lucy, triumphantly, looking round at Belle. “I shouldn’t wonder if she can answer your questions, after all, Belle, if you make them as simple as possible.”

“I think you’re making game of me,” Stella found

enough courage to say, smarting under the consciousness that she was being ridiculed.

"Making *game* of a martin!" said Lucy, plaintively. "Ah! that is how I am always misunderstood!"

Stella flashed a wrathful glance at her as she returned to her seat.

"Belle, she is an ogre! She will eat us with her eyes!" cried Lucy, clinging to her friend in mock alarm.

"Miss Martyn—I hardly dare ask you—how do you like Cleighton?" interrogated Belle, returning to the attack.

"I don't like it a bit!" Stella answered, abruptly.

She was beginning to think that "school" was not the paradise she had imagined it, and that her school-fellows were very disagreeable girls indeed.

"Dear me! Cleighton is unfortunate. Perhaps you may regard it more favourably when you have resided here a little longer. What do you think of the elephant?"

"I—I haven't seen it yet," said Stella, fancying that the young lady referred to one of the attractions of a menagerie she had seen in the town when she came through, in company with Mrs. Langley.

"Not?" said Miss Belle, arching her eyebrows in polite surprise. "I fancied—I must have been mistaken, though—that the elephant ushered you into this very room this evening!"

"No, indeed!" Stella returned, rather indignantly.

Stella had been an inmate of Sylvester Hall several days before she understood that "the elephant" was the title irreverently bestowed upon Madame Oliphant by her pupils. The entrance of the supper-tray put an end to the torture that Stella was enduring. A mug of milk and water and a thick slice of bread and cheese were served round to each girl; then came prayers, which were conducted by Mr. Oliphant, a white-haired old man, with a fat, wrinkled face; and then Stella was conducted to the chamber which she was to share with another girl, Sarah Lynne by name.

"You mustn't mind the girls teasing you," she ob-

served, patronisingly, setting down the candlestick upon the washstand, which, with two chairs and the bedstead, was the only furniture contained in the room. "They always do so at first, but they'll get tired of it soon, if you don't kick."

"Kick?" Stella said, interrogatively.

"Yes—don't seem to mind, I mean, you know. You'll like the girls very well soon."

But Stella privately thought it very doubtful, to say the least of it.

A few weeks' residence at Sylvester Hall, however, changed her opinion upon that point. Upon a nearer acquaintance, her tormentors were transformed into lively, clever, agreeable girls. A little too fond of fun and mischief, with high animal spirits, not always restrained within the bounds prescribed by good nature, they were the ringleaders of every frolic; but Stella, even had she willed it otherwise, would have found it impossible not to like them, when, finding after the first few days that Stella was determined not to "kick," and that the amusement to be derived from teasing her consequently bid fair to be what they, in not very young-lady-like phraseology, termed "rather slow fun," the two girls made the *amende honourable* at once, in a frank, graceful manner, that became them well.

After that, Stella's life at school was very pleasant. Ignorant even of the very rudiments of education, she found study, at first, very hard work. But her natural thirst for knowledge, and aptitude for acquiring it, helped her speedily to master the outlying difficulties in its pursuit; and these once conquered, her progress was rapid.

Sometimes, indeed, her old habit of castle-building hindered her sadly. Often, just as she most needed to concentrate her attention upon some particularly difficult point in her studies, something—the veriest trifle—would distract it, and off she would go into dream-land, and there luxuriate, until recalled by the voice of the "English" governess, or the summons to the recitation class, for which, of course, she would be totally unprepared.

The Sundays, Stella used to think, were the worst part of that time. Such dull, dreary Sundays, when the girls were all marched in pairs to the great square pew in the chapel, and she sat up on a high seat, with a back that pitched her forward, while her feet dangled uncomfortably about six inches from the floor, listening to a preacher who looked like a galvanised skeleton, and whose oratorical action consisted entirely in spasmodically raising, or rather jerking up his left arm, and then letting it fall again, in a fashion suggestive of nothing so much as a pump-handle—"the animated pump," Miss Belle irreverently styled him.

How Stella used to wish that the man would make a mistake and occasionally substitute his right arm for his left! But he never by any chance did—always that same monotonous, wearisome gesture, till Stella used to grow so tired of looking at him, and conscientiously tried to keep her sleepy eyes open by gazing round the chapel, and wondering how it was that the wax candles, in their wonderful gilt sconces, let them burn as long as they would, never got any shorter; and whether the people who built that chapel had a particular spite against little girls like herself, and made the seats so uncomfortable on purpose to torture them; the usual climax to her speculations being a heavy fall upon the floor of the pew, waking her with a vengeance. Then she would be set up again, blushing and bewildered, by one of the taller pupils, to endure the rest of the dreary service, a sadder and generally a less sleepy girl. How it was that she always escaped without a fractured nose, she never could comprehend.

But one Sabbath evening Stella made a grand discovery that explained the mystery of the wax candles, and robbed her for ever after of any anti-soporific influence that might be derived from her speculations upon that subject.

She had been gazing at them with intense curiosity; and, the service over, Madame Oliphant, who always sat still in solemn dignity till the chapel was nearly emptied, having marshalled her brood, preceded them



down the aisle. Stella, however, contrived to linger behind, and in an instant she had rushed into the nearest pew, clambered upon the seat, placed her daring hand upon the candle, tried to lift it from its socket, and found that it was not really a candle, but only a cunning imitation in white opaque glass.

Hastily she turned round to descend again, and confronted Miss Monk, the English teacher, who had missed her, and returned to ascertain her whereabouts. Stella actually gasped with fright, and nearly tumbled into Miss Monk's arms, in her haste to leave her undignified position.

"What are you doing there, Miss Martyn?" demanded the austere voice of the English teacher; and Stella found breath enough to stammer, in extenuation—

"I—I beg your pardon, Miss Monk! I thought they were candles."

"Candles, indeed! they are gas-lights, of course. And, pray, what if they were candles?"

"I wanted to find out why they never got any less."

"A pretty excuse," muttered Miss Monk. But a grim smile flitted across her lips; and Stella, watching her, felt pretty sure that she would escape punishment that time. And so she did; only receiving a rather unnecessary intimation that such conduct must not be repeated.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### A BLACK-BORDERED ENVELOPE.

THUS four years passed away, their quiet monotony broken only by an occasional visit from Mrs. Langley or Marmaduke; for Stella's vacations were all spent at Sylvester Hall.

Upon his last visit, now nearly a year ago, Duke informed her that he had won his diploma, and that he was going abroad for a couple of years or so, after

which, he laughingly said, he intended to come home, and settle down quietly for the rest of his existence.

"You may be sure," he said kindly, seeing the girl's lips quiver at the thought of not seeing him for so long, "you may be quite sure, that one of my first visits, when I return, will be to you. And, Stella, never forget that your name signifies 'a star,' and try to grow up worthy of it; try to be as bright and pure a star as any of those bright orbs that have shone for ages in the firmament above us!" and the next minute Duke was gone.

"I ought to be good, if only out of pure gratitude to him," Stella murmured, dashing away the tears that rose to her eyes, as she watched his receding figure.

A great intimacy had sprung up between Stella and Sarah Lynne. The latter girl, however, had the greatest share in bringing about the existing state of affairs; for, if left to herself, Sarah was not exactly the girl whose companionship Stella would have sought; but, feeling unwilling to resist Sarah's advances, she allowed herself to drift somehow into a friendship with her.

To be sure, there was nothing apparently objectionable in Miss Lynne. She belonged to a respectable and comparatively wealthy family; she was quiet, well dressed, and a "member" of a religious society. But Madame Oliphant used to say, when particularly vexed with her, "There! I declare that girl has no more *mind* than this teaspoon, not a bit!" and Sarah never attempted to dispute the verdict.

"I don't know much," she would smile and say, with what some people thought charming candour. "I don't know much; but I know quite as much as I want to. I never can see the sense of bothering one's brains with a lot of learning."

These being Miss Lynne's sentiments, and she, moreover, being impressed with the firm conviction, that she not only knew "as much as she wanted to," but that she knew *quite enough*, it is needless to say that Stella profited little, intellectually, from her society. Real, genuine friends, of course, the two

girls were not—could not be; what young girls term “companions” they were; and there was just about as much interchanging of ideas and communion of thought and sentiment as there usually is in such cases. They walked out together, and Stella was the recipient of Sarah’s “secrets;” but, having none of her own to impart in return, theirs was a very one-sided intercourse.

Sometimes Stella tried to bring the conversation round to subjects in which *she* felt interested. But the effort was vain; and feeling that she was not understood, she at length ceased to try, and allowed Sarah to babble on, very often into unheeding ears; for—and this was her chief recommendation in Stella’s eyes—Miss Lynne was not *exigeant* in her demands upon her friend’s attention; an occasional monosyllable satisfied her, and these supplied, Stella might listen or not, as she pleased, and she very often “pleased” to do the latter.

Still, though often doubting whether she had acted wisely in allowing herself to become thus entangled, Stella really liked her friend. She believed that Sarah, if she was deficient in intellectual capacity, was, at least, sincere and true-hearted, and well-intentioned towards the world. She feared no moral contamination from her society—mental deterioration, she fancied, was all she had to dread, and against that she would jealously guard. But she could scarcely help being conscious that Sarah was very unlikely to help her to become “worthy of her name;” for continual dropping will wear away a rock: and somehow, even when she seemingly paid no attention to Sarah’s confidences, they were not without an influence upon her, and always seemed to bring all the froth in her nature to the surface, and to sink the good out of sight.

Some months back, somebody had actually fallen in love with the English teacher, and carried her off to adorn his home in a distant county. She had been a “perfect treasure,” and Madame Oliphant bewailed her loss accordingly, and declared that she should

"never, never find one to fill her place." But her place was filled—and more than filled, some of the pupils asserted—by her successor, a pale, fragile-looking girl, with large, pleading blue eyes, who could not have been more than twenty, yet possessing a kind of gentle dignity of her own, that enabled her to maintain her authority over her self-willed and often unruly pupils.

She was very quiet and rather reserved in her habits, treating all the girls with uniform kindness and consideration, but making no special friendships, even among the older ones. Still she succeeded in securing the regard of all, and especially of Stella Martyn, who fancied she seemed very delicate and unfit for the duties which she was called upon to perform. After school-hours the elder pupils were allowed to occupy themselves as they pleased.

One balmy spring evening, Madame Oliphant, tempted by its beauty, took herself and her husband out upon a visit to a friend who lived a few miles from Cleighton.

The pupils were all out, rambling amongst the fields. The sun, though not far above the horizon, was still shining brightly, when Stella and Sarah Lynne, after sauntering slowly along Belmont Road, in the direction of the town, opened a little white gate, and entered a large meadow adjoining the orchard at the back of Sylvester Hall. In one corner of the field was a large, far-spreading old oak tree, with a rude seat surrounding its enormous trunk, and towards this the two girls bent their steps.

"Lovely! isn't it?" Stella observed. "I believe it will be warm enough to sit here for some time yet. You stay here—I'll fetch me a book!" and springing up, without waiting for the remonstrance which she knew would follow, she bounded away in the direction of the house.

"What is the matter, Miss Jesson?" she exclaimed, in sudden alarm, as she opened the door of the schoolroom, where the English teacher was sitting beside a heap of slates and copy-books, her face very

pale and wan-looking, with big tears gathering in her closed eyes, and plashing slowly down her white cheeks. "What is the matter, Miss Jesson? dear Miss Jesson, do tell me!" repeated Stella, earnestly, receiving no answer at first.

"Nothing, dear," Miss Jesson said at length, but so faintly that Stella could hardly catch the words, "except a headache, and—and I am hysterical, I believe."

"Yes, and tired," said Stella, in self-reproachful tones; "tired and ill, while I was out, thinking only of my own pleasure! Well, I must make haste and cure you;" and the next moment she was in the kitchen.

"Give me a little brandy — quick, Margaret, please!" she said hastily, as she opened the door.

But Margaret did not answer, for the room was untenanted.

Rushing to the window, Stella saw that Margaret, taking advantage of the holiday occasioned by the absence of her mistress, was at that moment in the orchard, holding an animated conversation with her "young man."

Leaning out of the window, at the imminent risk of her neck, Stella screamed out, "Margaret! Margaret!" at the top of her voice. But Margaret, to all intents and purposes, was deaf; and, wringing her hands in her grief and impatience, Stella glanced eagerly round the apartment.

By some accident, the door of the cupboard which contained the brandy had been left ajar, and without pausing to reflect, Stella pounced upon the decanter, and partially filled a wine-glass with the liquor; then, with that in one hand, and a large jug of water in the other, she went post-haste back to Miss Jesson, quite unconscious that her proceedings had been watched by Sarah Lynne.

Stella found Miss Jesson in precisely the same state in which she had left her. Setting down the jug upon one of the drab-painted, ink-splashed desks, she poured some of the brandy between Miss Jesson's pallid lips,

till she had the satisfaction of seeing her look a little better, and then the water came into requisition, and the poor fragile-looking hands and face were softly bathed; and presently Miss Jesson, though still looking almost like a ghost, was able to sit up and murmur her thanks.

"Don't, please don't, to-night," Stella said, earnestly, seeing Miss Jesson trying feebly to pull the heap of slates towards her.

"I must, dear; those exercises must all be corrected this evening. I haven't any too much time, indeed."

"I am sure Madame Oliphant would excuse you to-night," Stella said, in a remonstrating tone. But Miss Jesson only shook her head slightly.

"You are not fit, Miss Jesson, indeed you are not! See, there, now, how your hands tremble—you can hardly hold the slate. Let me do it—I know I could."

Another shake of the head was the only reply Stella received. And, with a faint wan smile, Miss Jesson was about to proceed with her task, when Stella laid violent, though very respectful, hands on the slate.

"I'll try, at any rate," she said resolutely. "Miss Jesson, please sit quiet while I look over these; you can just glance over them after me, you know."

And for the next half-hour Stella was very busy indeed, only interrupting herself every now and then to ask Miss Jesson anxiously how she felt. At the end of that time her self-imposed task was done, and done well too. And Miss Jesson's words of thanks and commendation, though few, were warm; and Stella, looking at her teacher's tired white face, felt amply repaid for the loss of her anticipated "read" under the trees.

Sarah Lynne's exercise was among those that came under her supervision; and Stella, as she noted the large number of corrections that were necessary, thought it was quite as well that Sarah did not know that she had anything to do with it.

"I suppose she would think I needn't have noticed them," she thought. "But I think it would be only false kindness to pass them over. Besides, of course Miss Jesson would have seen that it wasn't right; and then she wouldn't have trusted me to do the others."

Miss Jesson soon retired to her room. Left alone, Stella sat for some time, quietly musing over the principal events in her own brief history, till the door opened, and Belle Ashleigh and Lucy Clinton burst into the schoolroom.

"Here she is," said the former, merrily, "dreaming over her *billet-doux* in the gloaming. What a thing it is to be in love, to be sure! Thank goodness, I'm 'fancy free,' and likely to remain so! I wonder what her own true knight has said to her to cause such a reverie as the one we broke in upon!"

"You nonsensical creature!" exclaimed Stella, waking up. "What are you talking about? *Billet-doux*, indeed! I have had no ordinary epistles, let alone *billet-doux*! Such fairy billets all fall to Miss Belle Ashleigh's share—Cleighton knights have no admiration to spare for me!"

"What innocence!" exclaimed Belle. "She dares to deny it—and with the proof of her guilt lying at her very feet, too!" and the young girl picked up a letter that was lying unheeded upon the floor, and flung it into Stella's lap.

"What is that?" asked Stella.

"You ought to know—I don't. Something pleasant, I should think, judging from its effect."

"I know nothing about it," said Stella, giving the missive a closer inspection. "Why, it is addressed to Miss Jesson!—edged with black, too. Oh! I hope it is nothing very bad. I will restore it to her at once."

Letter in hand, Stella proceeded to Miss Jesson's room. A faint "Come in" answered her light tap at the door, and Stella entered. Miss Jesson was kneeling beside the bed, with her face buried in her hands.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Jesson," Stella said, softly, coming forward with the black-bordered little envelope

which she instinctively knew was the cause of Miss Jesson's illness, "but you dropped this in the school-room, and I thought perhaps you would like to have it."

Miss Jesson did not answer her. But the golden head was raised then, and the misty blue eyes looked up into hers with such an intensity of pain, such dreary anguish in their azure depths, that quick sympathetic tears rose to Stella's eyes, and a big choking lump swelled up suddenly in her throat, and prevented her utterance for a moment. She fell down upon her knees beside Miss Jesson, and silently caressed the cold little hand that hung listlessly by her side.

"If—if I could only do something to help you!" she ventured, wistfully, at length.

"You cannot, dear," Miss Jesson answered, very gently, but with an evident effort. "Nothing—nobody on earth can help me—now!"

The words ended in a weary sigh, and her head sank down again to its former resting-place. And, with an intuitive perception that the truest kindness would be to leave her alone with her sorrow, Stella crept out of the room again, closing the door very softly behind her.

Just outside, upon the landing, she came upon Sarah Lynne. That young lady was evidently not in the best of humours.

"Pretty sort you are!" was her greeting, "to run off like that from anybody! Why couldn't you say you were going to stay indoors?"

"Hush!" whispered Stella, for Sarah's voice was raised to an unnecessarily high key. "You will disturb Miss Jesson, I am afraid. Come a little farther away, please."

"Hush? what for? I don't need to be told how to speak!" exclaimed Sarah, with huge disdain.

"My dear Sarah, do be quiet, please! Miss Jesson is ill, and I don't wish her to be disturbed."

"Ill? what's the matter with her?" demanded Sarah, her tones still loud and excited. "So am I ill, but you



don't trouble about me; oh, no! you run away, and poor Sarah may do as she can."

"I didn't mean to run away from you," said Stella, quietly. "I had no thought, when I left you, of staying in the house. Ill? did you say you were ill, Sarah? What is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing that you would care to know about," was the sulky reply.

"Indeed I care; you know that, Sarah," Stella said, patiently, looking at her friend's face with some alarm; for Miss Lynne's usually doughy complexion was now flushed a fiery red, and her eyes, never very large, were smaller and duller than ever, and looking very much inflamed.

"My dear Sarah, what is the matter?" Stella asked, with genuine anxiety. "You look as if you are going to have a fever. To be sure, you are ill! Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Of course I'm ill! I told you so; my head aches frightfully," exclaimed Sarah, pettishly. And now, her apprehensions once excited, Stella noticed, what she had not observed before, that her friend's voice was very thick and husky, and her utterance indistinct.

"You had better go to bed directly," Stella said decidedly, feeling still more alarmed at this new symptom. "Lean on me; I will help you to your room," she added quickly, throwing one arm round Sarah's waist, as she staggered, and seemed about to fall.

Half leading, half carrying her, for she was almost incapable of walking, Stella assisted her friend to her own room—for the two girls no longer shared one apartment—and helped her to undress.

After one or two ineffectual attempts, Sarah scrambled into bed; her head fell heavily upon the pillow, scarcely touching it, however, before she was fast asleep.

"I hope you will feel better now. I will ask Madame to send for the doctor when she comes home," observed Stella, addressing the unconscious form, round which she was carefully wrapping the bedclothes.

A loud snore was the only reply. Stella stood for

some moments looking down in anxious perplexity upon Sarah's flushed features.

"What can be the matter with her?" she murmured. "I never saw anybody look so strange in my life, except—yes, except my mother. But that, of course, is impossible! I wonder whether the doctor ought to be sent for? Perhaps it would be a pity to disturb her to-night, as she is sleeping so soundly; I will wait and see how she is to-morrow."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### UNDER A CLOUD.

"THERE'S such a row in the rookery!" said Belle, confidentially, next morning, as Stella, after paying a visit to Miss Lynne's apartment, and finding her sufficiently recovered to come down to breakfast, descended the stairs, and nearly stumbled over Miss Belle, who was sitting nonchalantly upon the lowest step.

"What about?" asked Stella, carelessly.

"Don't know exactly; but there's something up, I'm sure! The elephant hasn't taken the paper out of those front curls of hers this morning, and *that* means mischief, you know. Gracious me! I wouldn't be in somebody's shoes to-day for a trifle!"

"In whose?"

"Haven't the least idea. I think I'm safe enough in my own, though;" and Belle glanced complacently down at her pretty, neatly slippered feet.

"Well, I don't feel particularly alarmed; but I should like to know what is the matter."

"Why, it seems the elephant isn't in quite such good spirits as she ought to be," said Belle, coolly. "At least, that's what I can make out of it. She had the spasms or something in the night, and she sent for the brandy, and lo and behold, it was half water!"

"Half water?" repeated Stella, incredulously.

"Yes; don't you see, somebody had been helping herself out of the bottle, and, hoping to escape detection, I suppose, afterwards filled it up with water. The elephant thinks it must have been one of us girls. But, hare-brained as we are, some of us, I don't think either of us would be guilty of such a trick as that, do you?"

"No, indeed!" answered Stella, emphatically.

"Well, I think we had better give our heads an extra screw round, or else we shall very likely lose them," observed Belle, gravely. "Just feel if mine is quite tight," she added, bending her head towards Stella in comic alarm.

"Just a little bit unsteady," smiled Stella, putting one hand on each side of the sunshiny head, and throwing it from side to side.

"Miss Martyn, you are labouring under a delusion. Halloa! who is this?"

*'By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes.'*

Oh, it's only Sarah Lynne! How awfully fishy she looks about the eyes this morning!"

"I wonder how *you* would look if Madame Oliphant happened to overhear some of your elegant speeches," observed Stella.

"My word! shouldn't I catch it?" was the merry rejoinder, as the girls, obeying an intimation that breakfast was ready, entered the school-room, where that repast was usually served.

Miss Jesson, who generally presided at the matutinal meal, was that morning, however, released from the duties consequent upon her position; for Madame Oliphant, grim and stately, and, if possible, more erect than usual, herself took the seat of honour at the head of the table, and dispensed thick slices of bread and butter, and cups of weak coffee, in ominous silence,—an arrangement for which Miss Jesson was probably thankful, for she looked wretchedly ill, and the dark rings that encircled her eyes testified to her having passed a sleepless night.

Breakfast and prayers over, Madame Oliphant rose, and, after exchanging a few words in an undertone with Miss Jesson, left the room.

"I believe, Miss Ashleigh," said Miss Jesson, "that Madame Oliphant wishes to see you in the music-room."

"Wants me?" said Belle, in ludicrous dismay. "How odd! It's lucky my equanimity isn't easily disturbed," she added, passing her hand round her neck with a significant gesture, as she passed Stella on her way to the door.

Belle reappeared in a few minutes.

"It's your turn now," she said to Miss Lynne.

"Oh! what is it?" asked Sarah, apprehensively, her face flushing a dull red. "Do tell us, Belle, what is the matter?"

"Go in, as I did, and you'll know all about it," returned Belle, oracularly.

And Sarah, though apparently suffering from a good deal of nervous trepidation, entered the room where Madame Oliphant awaited her.

The mystery was soon explained. As Belle had said, somebody had stolen some brandy from the decanter, and afterwards filled it up with water, and Madame had determined to examine each girl separately, in order, if possible, to discover the culprit.

"Please, ma'am, I wish you wouldn't ask me," Sarah ingenuously answered to Madame Oliphant's inquiry as to whether she knew anything about the matter.

"I must ask you," was the stern reply. "I will not rest until I have sifted this affair to the bottom. You do know, then, who has been guilty of this contemptible meanness?"

Sarah looked as if she wanted to sink through the floor; she hesitated, flushed, looked up—down—anywhere but at the face of her interlocutor, and finally stammered out—

"Indeed, ma'am, I would rather not tell."

"Then, if you do not, I shall conclude that you are yourself guilty," said Madame Oliphant, coldly, turning

away as if to intimate that the interview need not be prolonged.

"No, ma'am, it wasn't me!" Sarah eagerly interposed, her faulty grammar for once escaping any comment from Madame; "but I am afraid—we are such friends, you know—it seems mean to tell."

"To whom are you referring? I honour your scruples, Miss Lynne; but in such an affair as this I insist upon knowing the truth; so please answer my questions without further evasion."

The searching cross-examination to which she was subjected at last extorted from Sarah the apparently reluctant admission, that she had, the previous evening, seen Stella Martyn in the kitchen, in the act of abstracting some brandy from a decanter.

"But I don't think," commented Sarah, who looked pained and distressed beyond measure at the revelation she was compelled to make, "that she took more than a wine-glassful; and I feel sure," she added, more as if she felt herself in duty bound to say something in extenuation of her friend's fault, than as if she really believed what she was saying, "that she didn't put the water to it."

"I will not detain you longer," said Madame Oliphant, quietly ignoring Sarah's last speech. "Send Miss Martyn to me, if you please."

"Stella Martyn! Incredible!" she murmured as Sarah, glad to escape, quickly withdrew. "I can scarcely believe my own ears!"

"If what Miss Lynne has stated is correct, I need scarcely inform you of what has occurred," said Madame Oliphant, coldly, as Stella entered the room. "I am grieved, deeply grieved, that a young lady in whom I placed implicit confidence could have thus abused it."

"Then you have discovered the thief, Madame?" asked Stella, respectfully. "I am very glad. If you had not done so, each of us would have felt herself an object of suspicion."

Madame Oliphant looked at her as if amazed at her audacity.

"I wonder that you consider the discovery a matter of congratulation, Miss Martyn," she said, dryly; "especially when, if my information be correct, the criminal now stands before me."

"I?" Stella said, in proud surprise, as the fact that she was the person to whom Madame Oliphant thus pointedly alluded, dawned upon her. "I scarcely understand you! You have been misinformed, Madame."

"Indeed!" remarked Madame, with an incredulous smile. "I scarcely think so. I shall be very glad, however, if you are able to substantiate your statement. Am I to believe that you know nothing of the theft?"

"Certainly, Madame."

"Miss Lynne says," said Madame, slowly, and watching keenly the effect of her words,— "Miss Lynne says—I must do her the justice to say that she seemed unwilling, very unwilling, to say anything to implicate you—she says that she saw you in the kitchen, pouring out some of the brandy into a glass. Is that correct?"

"Probably," was the quiet answer. "I was there—she may have seen me."

"Then you acknowledge that you took the brandy?"

"Some of it, Madame. Miss Jesson was ill in the schoolroom, and I went into the kitchen, intending to ask Margaret for some brandy. She was not there; but, happening to see the decanter standing in the cupboard, I poured out about half a glassful, and carried it to Miss Jesson. That is all I know of it, Madame."

And Stella, her explanation finished, stood quietly before her accuser, her hands clasped tightly together, only her quivering lips showing how deeply the suspicion had wounded her sensitive nature.

Madame Oliphant gazed at her in silence for a moment.

"I am unwilling to believe you guilty," she said at length, "more unwilling than you can imagine; but

you must see yourself that the evidence against you is very strong. What can I think? Can you find any one to corroborate your story?"

"Only Miss Jesson," said Stella, trying to suppress the indignant tears that were rising to her eyes. "May I fetch her, Madame?"

"Certainly," assented the lady.

Miss Jesson's story, of course, confirmed Stella's in every particular. But Madame still looked unsatisfied.

"It is very strange," she said, musingly—"very! How long was Miss Martyn absent while she fetched you the brandy, Miss Jesson?"

"About a minute, I should judge," replied Miss Jesson. "I was hardly conscious of the lapse of time, but certainly she was not gone long enough to have secreted the quantity of brandy that was stolen."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure," said Miss Jesson, firmly.

Stella gave her a grateful glance as she uttered the words.

"Did Miss Martyn leave you again, Miss Jesson?" was the next question.

"No; we sat together for more than an hour in the schoolroom, while she looked over the second class exercises for me."

"And you noticed nothing unusual in her manner?"

"Nothing, except a little excitement, probably occasioned by my illness."

"What time was it when you found Miss Jesson in the schoolroom?" asked Madame.

"About a quarter to seven, I think," replied Stella.

"And you sat with her for more than an hour—that would make it about eight;"—turning to Miss Jesson—"Margaret says she did not leave the house before twenty minutes to seven, and that she was in the kitchen again at five minutes past. It follows, then, if Miss Martyn took the brandy, she must have taken it during the time she left you to get you a restorative. Now the question is, could she have

disposed of it in the time, without drinking it upon the spot?"

"I am certain she could not," said Miss Jesson, promptly. "And I am equally certain she had not been drinking brandy when she returned to me. Ill as I was, I must have noticed it, if she had."

"I cannot understand it at all," observed Madame, thoughtfully. "You say you saw no one, Miss Martyn, while you were in the kitchen?"

"No one, Madame."

"But it seems you were observed," interposed Miss Jesson, quickly. "Who was your informant, Madame?"

"Sarah Lynne," volunteered Stella.

"Ah! then, of course, she could not be far off at the time! It is just possible, Madame, that Miss Lynne may have taken the liquor, and tried to avert suspicion from herself by fixing it upon her friend!"

"It is possible," said Madame, still in the same thoughtful tone. "Did you see her at all last night, Miss Martyn?"

"Yes, Madame; I saw her immediately after I left Miss Jesson's room."

"Was there anything unusual in her appearance or manner?"

"She was ill," Stella answered slowly, a suspicion that rapidly deepened into conviction flashing across her mind; "I was afraid that she was going to have a fever, and——"

"Ah, indeed!" said Madame, as Stella paused. "Ill was she? and feverish—enough so to excite your apprehensions? In what way did this feverishness manifest itself?"

"Her face was flushed; and she seemed very weak—hardly able to stand," said Stella. "I put her to bed, and she soon fell asleep, or I should have requested you to send for Dr. Mustaff."

"Hum! And you never thought of substituting 'intoxication' for 'fever'?" asked Madame, fixing her keen bright eyes upon Stella's face.

"Certainly not, Madame," replied Stella, looking startled.



"Which do you think it was now?" demanded Madame.

Stella flushed.

"Pardon me, Madame," she said, quietly: "I have suffered too much myself, through being unjustly suspected, to be willing to inflict such pain upon another."

"Not even to clear yourself? That will do, then, thank you, for the present—you are at liberty," added Madame, as the young girl still lingered.

"Am I cleared from suspicion, Madame?" asked Stella, earnestly.

"Nobody is cleared yet," said Madame, a little impatiently.

Miss Jesson and Stella returned to the schoolroom, where Sarah Lynne was making capital of her interview with Madame Oliphant, and—perhaps unconsciously—doing infinitely more damage to her friend's character than a thorough-going open enemy could have done.

The general impression was, that Stella was guilty, but there were one or two exceptions to the rule.

"I don't believe a word of it!" Belle Ashleigh was saying, vehemently, as Stella opened the door. "I would stake my life upon her innocence!"

"And you need have no fear of consequences, if you did," said Miss Jesson's soft voice, as she entered the room.

"Now, young ladies, we will proceed with the lessons, if you please."

It was hard to bear. Stella knew that most of the girls thought her guilty; she saw that they quietly avoided her; she felt in every fibre of her nature the sarcastic tones or the contemptuous glances which greeted her on every hand, when she was compelled to come in contact with her fellow-pupils. Her young heart swelled with passionate, rebellious anger, as her quick eyes noted the signs of the disfavour in which she was held.

It seemed to her as if the morning would never

pass away. She made her escape as soon as possible, and seeking her own little room, she flung herself down upon the floor to think and brood over the events of the morning.

Suddenly she sprang up, and stood before the tiny looking-glass upon her dressing-table.

"Let me see if 'thief' is written in legible characters upon my face! It must be, surely! Twice in my short life have I been accused of theft! What will Mrs. Langley and Mr. Marmaduke say, if they should hear of this? And they will hear! And if I do not succeed in clearing my character, I shall be expelled from the school! A pretty return for their kindness that would be! Oh, I would give ten years of my life, rather than that should happen!" she exclaimed passionately, passing her hand across her forehead, as if she almost expected to feel the word "thief" engraved there, as she stood looking fixedly at the reflection that met her gaze.

A pale, delicate face, with clear, well-cut features, set in a frame of golden hair, with very dark, strongly marked brows, and a pair of dark gray eyes, now almost black with excitement, and glowing like two stars, and with no trace of the cringing, cowed expression of long ago in their brilliant depths, looked back at her from the little square of glass.

Not a beautiful face—hardly a pretty one, according to the usual standard of female prettiness; but it was an attractive, piquant face—charming, if only because of its unusual style, though there were not wanting those who declared that a fair complexion, golden hair, and dark eyes and eyebrows were "a horrid combination, my dear; why, the girl is a perfect fright!" But, as these detractors were mainly of the fairer sex, their opinion must not be allowed to have too much weight.

Stella had altered wonderfully since her admission at Sylvester Hall. Small and pale she was still—would always be—from the ill effects of the privations she had suffered during the greater part of her young life. But she did not look unhealthy. No colour

tinged the fair white cheeks, but they had that roundness of contour so seldom seen after the first flush of girlhood has passed away, and that only accompanies perfect if not robust health; and her complexion was clear and transparent as alabaster, the freckles that once disfigured it having vanished long since; her hair was several shades darker than in the old time, and was now of a rich golden hue, of that especial tint that some of the old masters delighted to paint. A trifle below the medium height, her figure was slender and well-rounded, and as lithe and graceful as a young willow.

Altogether, Stella could well bear comparison with the young ladies of Cleighton, though the little town *was* rather noted for its pretty girls.

A light tap at the door followed the girl's passionate soliloquy, and she opened it at once, to admit Miss Jesson.

"Don't touch me—don't come near me!" Stella exclaimed wildly, starting back. "Don't you see that I am a thief?"

"I see nothing of the kind," Miss Jesson said, soothingly, glancing at the girl's excited face; "but I see that you are just now suffering under an unjust suspicion, and that you are naturally wounded thereat."

"Don't you really believe me guilty?" asked Stella, wistfully.

"I am thoroughly convinced of your innocence, my dear."

"But then, you see, Miss Jesson, everybody else believes it!" and Stella's face, which had brightened a little at that crumb of comfort, overcast again.

"But they will not believe it long, my dear; your innocence will soon be made manifest, and the real criminal be brought to light."

Miss Jesson spoke so confidently, that Stella was almost infected with her enthusiasm, and she smiled faintly.

"It is very hard to bear just now, I know," continued her friend; "but we must hope that it is only

a passing cloud, from which you will emerge with an unstained character."

"Yes, but if it shouldn't be!" objected Stella. "Suppose I should be expelled—suppose that Mrs. Langley should think me a thief! Oh, Miss Jesson, I could not bear that!"

"Even then, dear, you must try to bear it patiently. The most severe trials"—Miss Jesson's voice faltered slightly—"if we bear them bravely and patiently, because we believe they are sent for our good—it may be to correct some evil in us, of whose existence we were almost unaware—will prove a blessing in the end. You know the verse beginning—'Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take.'"

"Ah, but I'm not a saint!" said Stella, shaking her head dubiously. "But, Miss Jesson, I wanted to ask you—if I knew—if I thought I knew, I mean—who took the brandy, do you think I ought to clear myself by telling Madame Oliphant?"

"You ought to be sure first, my dear."

"Yes; and if I were sure?"

"Then, I think your first duty would be to clear your own character. I have no sympathy with those well-meaning, but, in my opinion, misjudging people who allow themselves to be branded with shame, on purpose to shield the real offender. It is mistaken kindness, to say the least of it—and I am not sure that it does not merit a harsher title—because, in many cases, it only hardens the guilty person, by imparting a feeling of security; whereas, if he were once discovered and punished, the probability is, that one lesson would be a sufficient cure for the evil."

"Yes, that is how I feel," said Stella, thoughtfully; "only I thought perhaps it was because it is myself that made me feel so. Thank you, Miss Jesson."

The result of this conversation was, that Stella waylaid Miss Lynne as the latter was proceeding, after lessons, to her room, in quest of her outdoor habiliments. In vain Stella had sought an interview with her earlier in the day; for Sarah, wishing for nothing less than for a private conversation with her friend,

had, without seeming to do so, persistently avoided her. She changed colour slightly, as Stella accosted her at the door of her own room, with the apparently careless observation—

"Come in here a minute, Sarah; I want to speak to you."

"I can't, just now," she said, hurriedly; "wait till I come back."

"Thank you; I don't feel inclined to wait here till bedtime, on the chance of seeing you then," returned Stella, coolly. "Come now, please!" and she drew Sarah inside the room, and closed the door.

"Make haste, then—I'm in a hurry," said Sarah, unwillingly submitting. "I daresay you want to scold me, because I told the elephant that I saw you taking the brandy. But you needn't be so savage about it. I'm sure I didn't want to tell her—only she bothered me so, I was obliged to tell her the truth."

"*Did* you tell her the truth?"

Stella's tone was so significant, that Sarah glanced at her in surprise. Miss Lynne never could look anybody full in the face, and her eyes shifted uneasily, and then fell before her questioner's steady gaze.

"I don't know what you mean," she began, assuming an air of injured innocence.

"All the truth, I mean," interrupted Stella. "You knew very well that it was not *I* who drank brandy last night till I was unable to stand—but you did not tell her that!"

"What—what do you mean?" gasped Sarah.

"That if you do not go at once to Madame Oliphant, and tell her that I am innocent of the theft imputed to me, *I* will go to her, and tell her of the state in which I found you last night—a state of utter, helpless intoxication!"

A greenish glare shone for a moment in Miss Lynne's eyes.

"You—you *dare* not!" she almost hissed, leaning forward, and grasping Stella's arm, till the girl winced with pain.

"I dare—and will!" was the calm reply. And Sarah saw that she was thoroughly in earnest.

"It is false! I was ill!" cried Sarah, angrily. "You know it is—you know you stole the brandy yourself, and now want to lay it to me, to shield yourself!"

Stella turned, and placed her hand upon the handle of the door.

"Another word of that kind," she said, with flaming eyes, "and you will not have the opportunity of giving Madame Oliphant a milder version of the story."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" asked Sarah, changing her tone, in alarm lest the threat should be immediately executed.

"I have told you."

"But I can't! If it was true, I might. Stella, don't be so hard on me."

"I am not hard on you," said Stella, coldly; "I am only just to myself. My character is as precious to me as yours can possibly be to you; more so, because it is my only possession. That gone, and my prospects of earning an honest livelihood are gone too, for ever; while you have a home, and friends, who, however grieved they may be, would never dream of deserting you."

"No, thank goodness, I shan't be obliged to earn my own living!" said Sarah, with petty spite. "But I don't see the fun of making myself out a thief to all the girls to please you, and I won't do it, that's flat!"

"You would rather they should think you not only a thief, but a drunkard?" said Stella, quietly. "Very well. But I don't ask you to confess to the girls, only to Madame Oliphant; they need not know anything about it."

"As if they wouldn't know! Besides, if I go and tell the elephant such a tale as you seem to want me, she will expel me directly!"

"You should have thought of that before you drank the brandy. I don't think, though, that you will be expelled. Are you going?"

"Not I, indeed!"

"Very well, then, I am!" rejoined Stella, firmly.

Sarah laughed a forced, unpleasant laugh.

"You don't really think that people will believe such a story?" she said, disdainfully. "They will think that you are only doing it to throw the blame on me."

"I will risk that."

The lock rattled under Stella's hand, and the door was open, when Sarah said, hastily—

"Well, you needn't be in such a hurry! Can't you give anybody time to think a minute?"

"You have had plenty of time for consideration—but I will give you two minutes more. Only, if you refuse, remember, you must abide by the consequences of your decision; they will be certain disgrace and expulsion!"

In perfect silence the prescribed time passed away, Miss Lynne's face growing more sullen every moment, till the stillness was broken by Stella's inquiring, "Well?"

"Oh, I'll go!" she muttered, sulkily.

"I thought you would," observed Stella, quietly, drawing a long breath of relief. "Come along!"

"Not just now!" protested Sarah, drawing back in alarm.

"Yes, now. Come," insisted the inexorable Stella.

Miss Lynne was not expelled. Owing more to Stella's entreaties than to Sarah's own terrified prayers, Madame Oliphant was induced to look over the offence, and the secret was not divulged to the rest of the pupils; the only explanation given to them being a few words from Madame, to the effect that she had discovered the real culprit, and that Stella was cleared from all blame. And then the whole affair was, apparently, quietly consigned to oblivion. But it had an effect upon Stella's after-life.

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## CHAPTER IX.

## MISS BELLE'S OPINION OF "PARSONS."

EVEN "Bennie" faded into insignificance beside the new "lion" of Cleighton, the young Wesleyan minister who had replaced the worthy Mr. Mumford, of pump-handle notoriety. The latter gentleman, having prolonged his stay in Cleighton to the utmost limit allowed by Wesleyan rules, at length shook the dust of that ungrateful town from his capacious "Bluchers," and betook himself to "fresh fields and pastures new," leaving the spiritual affairs of his quondam flock to the care of his "super" and the new preacher, the Rev. Justin Percy.

Young, handsome, talented, and with a wonderfully attractive manner, the new preacher soon became the rage; and fortunate was it for the crowds of people who flocked into the chapel on alternate Sundays, and went away charmed with the flood of impassioned eloquence poured into their ears, that the old cramped little building had been pulled down under the *régime* of the Rev. Theophilus Mumford, and a new, spacious edifice erected in its place, the like of which was hardly to be found in the whole country round. Proud, indeed, were the Cleighton Wesleyans of their chapel and their minister, or ministers, perhaps we ought to say, for the "super" was no despicable preacher—"A very nice man, very nice indeed, but not like Mr. Percy, you know!" was the general verdict.

"Isn't he a darling man? Didn't you love him last night?" exclaimed Lucy Clinton, enthusiastically, one Monday, about three weeks after the Rev. Justin's arrival in Cleighton.

"I liked him very much, if you mean Mr. Percy," replied Stella, glancing up from her drawing.

"Who else could she mean? My dear Stella, I—yes, even I, the invincible Belle Ashleigh—am desperately in love with that man! I could worship the



very ground he walks on! I have given him my whole heart!" put in Belle, quaintly, she being the only other occupant of the room at the time.

"My dear, you don't possess such an article! At the worst, you can only have given him the corner that Charlie Linwood has left. Besides, Mr. Percy wouldn't appreciate the gift—he's married!"

"No!" exclaimed Belle, in comic dismay. "You don't mean it, Stella?"

"But I do. Didn't you see his wife at chapel yesterday?"

"What, that little pale creature in mourning? Well, I confess, my heart misgave me when I saw her! Dear me! And is it thus my hopes are blighted? Let my rival beware!" said Belle, striking an attitude, and trying to make her pretty features assume a ferocious expression. "But there! I don't envy her, poor little thing! I wouldn't be a minister's—especially a Methodist minister's—wife, for the world!"

"Dear me! What a sudden change of opinion!" laughed Stella. "Why not, pray?"

"You never heard me say I wanted to be his wife, did you?" demanded Belle. "I think the life of a Methodist minister's wife a dreadful one; changing about all the while, as they do—settling down among a lot of strangers, and then having to go away again just as you get used to the people and begin to like them; for of course, if people like your husband's preaching ever so, you can't stay over three years."

"No, I suppose not. But it's as bad for 'your husband' as it is for you, isn't it?"

"Oh, of course it's bad for both. But then, men are more mercurial in their disposition than women, you know—they don't mind being transplanted so much."

"Don't they, indeed?" said Stella, elevating her eyebrows. "Well, I'm sure I don't know—my acquaintance with the 'genus' is very limited."

"Well, mine isn't," said Belle,—and especially with the 'genus minister.' Few young girls have seen as much of preachers, of all denominations, as I have; for ours has been emphatically a 'ministers' house' ever

since I can remember. Let a man belong to whatever sect he might, if he only had the right to encircle his neck with a white 'choker,' he was welcome to my father's table, and to a home under his roof."

"How I should like to see your father!" was Stella's admiring exclamation. "I should think he numbers a good many warm friends among them."

"Not he, indeed!" rejoined Belle, scornfully. "Never was a man's hospitality more abused! Just let them once get away out of the place, and precious little any of them cared about him! One or two have written to him since they left, I think, but that's all. Every one of them promised to do so, and professed to be extremely grateful for his kindness; but I suppose it slipped their memories—parsons' memories are so elastic!"

"My dear Belle!" exclaimed Stella, looking up at her companion in astonishment. "How very irreverent!"

"I've seen too much of them," retorted Belle, significantly, "to have much reverence left for them, I can tell you, Stella! And the consequence is, the less I see of ministers out of the pulpit, the better I like them in it."

"My dear Belle, I am afraid you have allowed your acquaintance with a few unfortunate specimens to prejudice you against ministers as a class. Surely you do not mean to say that all ministers are alike? I daresay there are some 'black sheep' amongst them, but I should be very sorry to think that good, earnest, true-hearted men—men who have devoted their lives and their energies to the task of winning souls for their Master—were not in the majority."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to be 'very sorry,'" observed Belle, with a wise shake of her head that said "unutterable things." "I wish I didn't think so, but I do. Of course there are some good men in the ministerial ranks; but alas! their name isn't 'legion'; and I verily believe that scores of so-called 'ministers' do more harm by their inconsistent lives out of the pulpit, than they do good by their ministrations in it!"

"But, my dear Belle, ministers are only men—only human, after all, and subject, of course, to the frailties of human nature."

"Yes, of course they are. But then, one expects them to rise above their frailties. People naturally look up to their pastor as something superior; but they have keen eyes for his faults notwithstanding; and how can they reverence or respect him when they find that he is only common clay like themselves—that he is, in fact, an embodiment of petty meannesses and sins, if he is not guilty of open, flagrant wickedness?"

"That's where it is!" remarked Stella, thoughtfully; "people expect so much from their ministers, and——"

"Not more than they have a right to expect!" interrupted Belle, impetuously. "Of course one looks for a great deal in a man who has set himself apart to a pure and holy life, and one ought to be able to find it. Oh, I wish," she exclaimed, with a degree of earnestness very unusual in her, "I wish these ministers knew what harm they do when, instead of trying to live up to the high standard that they are always holding up to other people, they bedraggle themselves with the mud and mire of the world, and soil their souls with the sins they profess to condemn! I've known ministers, on a Sunday evening, preach a most thrilling, powerful sermon—many a time I've been quite touched, and felt almost ready to give up everything, and 'come to Jesus,' as the hymn says—and then, at the supper-table, they would talk, and laugh, and jest—sometimes even on sacred subjects—with a levity that would have been unbecoming in the lightest worldling, on the Sabbath day—and so my good impressions have all been scattered to the winds. I wish the winds joy of them! may they derive more benefit from them than I ever did!" concluded Belle, turning to the window, and drumming her fingers lightly upon the pane.

"But don't you think, Belle dear," said Stella, hesitatingly, "that if your good impressions vanished, as you say they did, it may have been partly your

own fault? Didn't you ever have 'good impressions' under any ministers besides those who acted in that way?"

"Oh, yes, I daresay I have," returned Belle, in her usual manner. "But I am not talking about my own faults just now; I'm too busy picking out those of other people—a much more pleasant employment. What a reform most of us could make in other people's morals, to be sure! But about these ministers. I've known others, who, if they didn't absolutely blow away my 'good impressions,' did nothing to confirm or deepen them; who never by any chance tried to turn the conversation into a better channel, or to introduce a higher topic; and as to offering to lead our evening devotions, unless they were almost forced to it, I believe they would as soon have thought of flying! Conceit, too," Belle went on, "is a very prevalent failing amongst the white-chokered fraternity. Did you ever see a parson who wasn't thoroughly convinced that every young girl in his flock was hopelessly in love with him, and that he might have the very best of 'em for just holding up his finger?"

"Little wonder either," Stella answered, mischievously, "if every 'parson' is a Mr Percy, and every young girl a Belle Ashleigh."

"You don't think I meant that nonsense, do you?" asked Belle, quickly. "I'm not quite so foolish as you think me, Stella. I'm only a young girl, and not a very wise one, I know; but I've thought a great deal on this subject, and, though my opinion isn't worth much, I think it's a great pity that men should be allowed to enter the ministry who haven't a decided vocation for it. It's a pity, too,"—once more flinging aside her unwonted seriousness—"that girls can't get into Parliament! What a lot of abuses I would sweep into oblivion, if I could only tack 'M.P.' to the end of my name! 'Belle Ashleigh, M.P.!' Sounds quite pretty, doesn't it?"

"Ambitious creature! But I don't see how Parliament is to sweep away the evil of which you have been complaining so bitterly. If a man says he has

had a call to the ministry, who's to contradict him? However, I'll give you my vote, when you stand for the county! I won't even ask whether your principles are Liberal or Conservative."

"I feel all the gratitude that such a promise deserves—gratitude in no degree lessened by the trifling fact that you haven't got a vote, and are not very likely to have one."

"Oh dear, how unfortunate! Well, that must be the first thing that 'Belle Ashleigh, M.P.,' attends to, when she gets her seat. I'll contrive to do without a vote till then."

"Make a virtue of necessity, eh?" laughed Belle.

"Not a bit of it! I don't know what I should do with a vote, if I had it, after I had helped to get you in—that's all I want one for."

"Where's Sarah Lynne?" asked Belle, suddenly drumming on the pane with increased vigour.

"Gone to chapel, I believe; it's her class-night, you know."

"Oh, to be sure! I forgot she was a 'member.' I don't know what good it does her, for my own part! I can't for the life of me see that she's any better than you or I, who make no 'profession.'"

"I wonder what makes Belle Ashleigh so bitter to-night?" said Stella.

"I'm not 'bitter'—the drumming going on more furiously than ever—"but I'm sick to death of pretension, and hypocrisy, and—and humbug! Lucky for me the elephant didn't hear that word, isn't it?"

"Do you think Sarah is a hypocrite?" questioned Stella, gravely.

"Do you think she is a Christian?" retorted Belle, facing round quickly.

"I have no right to think otherwise," replied Stella, parrying the question.

"Oh, stuff! Everybody has a right to judge other people by their works; and I'm sure Sarah Lynne's 'works' are not those of a Christian; therefore—I'm logical, you see—as she makes a profession of religion, she must be a hypocrite. And I believe you think so

yourself, only you don't like to say so because she's your friend. That's another puzzle, too! I never could make out what made you take to her—you are so unlike each other."

"I think you judge her harshly, Belle," Stella said, earnestly.

"Perhaps I do," rejoined Belle, carelessly. "But other people don't, if I do; all the 'chapel people' seem to think the world of her. What they see in her to make such a fuss with, I can't imagine."

"I think she can hardly be called a hypocrite," remonstrated Stella, feeling herself called upon to take up the cudgels in behalf of her friend. "You know, Belle, she always tells us that she doesn't pretend to be religious, and that she joined the church when she was quite a child, under the influence of religious excitement, and, that soon passing off, she was sorry afterwards that she had done so."

"Well, why didn't she withdraw? Why has she kept up the pretence all these years?" asked Belle.

"I don't know," answered Stella, thoughtfully; "unless it was because she hadn't the courage."

"Well, you haven't proved your position, in my opinion," argued impracticable Belle. "If she isn't exactly a hypocrite, she's next door to one—she is sailing under false colours, at any rate. I maintain that it is no excuse for her to say she doesn't make a pretence of being religious. She *does* make a pretence of it—before the world, if not to us girls! Bah! I've no patience with such people."

Stella was prevented from answering by the entrance of the young lady who had been thus "called over the coals," as she herself would have expressed it, had she been conscious that she had undergone such a process.

Belle endeavoured to conceal herself and her disgust behind a newspaper, which she spread out to its utmost extent.

Miss Lynne came in full of information. Mrs. Percy had been at chapel, and there was to be a Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Society formed, in con-

nection with the Young Men's Society, which was already nearly three weeks old, and under the presidency of Mr. Percy.

Mrs. Percy had favoured Miss Lynne with an invitation, and had requested her to bring with her as many of her fellow-pupils as could be induced to join the new society.

Belle's newspaper rustled tremendously, as Stella, always ready for mental improvement, expressed a wish to accompany Miss Lynne to the first meeting, which was to be held on the ensuing Monday evening.

"Won't you go, Belle?" asked Stella, with a mischievous smile; for she rightly interpreted the rustling to mean that Miss Ashleigh, entertaining no high opinion of the scheme, was venting her indignation upon the unconscious sheet.

"No, thank you;" the answer came in sepulchral tones from behind the paper.

"Why not?"

"I have reached such a pitch of perfection, that there's no room for improvement in me. I wish I could say the same of the 'Cleighton Record' and 'Bennie's' poetry."

"Poetry!" Stella repeated, with a laugh.

"I hope you don't mean to insinuate that it isn't poetry?" And, lowering the paper, Belle looked up with a face of innocent surprise.

"Not I, indeed—only it's fortunate for 'Bennie's' reputation that the Cleighton public is less discriminating than admiring. As it is, anything approaching to rhyme throws it into ecstasies."

"I'm sure he writes beautiful poetry," muttered Sarah Lynne; "I can't think what people would have!"

One would have thought from Miss Lynne's tone that it was her own poetical ability, instead of 'Bennie's,' that was called in question.

"It's astonishing how brilliant the 'Record' is getting," exclaimed Belle, suddenly. "Just you listen to this—'We regret to say that, on Tuesday last, Mr.

Blank cut his wife's throat, and afterwards committed suicide by the same means!"

"A novel mode of committing suicide, that!" commented Belle, "and one that I shall certainly adopt, when I want to 'shuffle off this mortal coil.' Fancy being able to commit suicide by cutting another person's throat! How very convenient! I feel quite grateful to the 'Cleighton Record' for the suggestion!"

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## CHAPTER X.

### "MUTUAL IMPROVEMENT."

A SEVERE cold, accompanied by a slight degree of fever, kept Stella a prisoner in the house for some weeks, and prevented her from joining the "Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Society," until it had become an established fact, and was incorporated with the "Young Men's Society," under the high-sounding title of the "Wesleyan Institute."

The two societies met separately and together upon alternate Monday evenings, and it was wonderful what an influence this arrangement exerted upon the attendance of the members. Some ill-natured persons asserted that the numbers swelled amazingly on the evenings when the fair members of the "Second Section" of the "Institute" trooped, with crimson cheeks and downcast lashes, into the schoolroom, and modestly seated themselves upon the benches reserved for their use—said benches being placed at a discreet distance from those occupied by the young men.

One or two of the latter there were ungallant enough to say that, as the extreme modesty of the young ladies would not permit them to take an active part in the proceedings on those occasions, it was unfair to allow them to be present; but the proposition of these discontented ones, that the ladies should



in future be excluded, except from lectures, having been negatived by a large majority, they continued to grace the meetings with their presence.

Stella, however, had determined to make her *debut* at a "private meeting;" and one evening in July, after a laughing promise to Belle to "report progress," she started from Sylvester Hall, accompanied by Miss Lynne, with that intention. But "the best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang oft a jee." Stella found, upon entering the little room in the chapel devoted to the use of the "Second Section," that indisposition had prevented Mrs. Percy from attending, and that some adverse fate had also caused the vice-president to absent herself.

As usual at the "private meetings," there were very few members present. About half a dozen girls sat round the walls, as stiffly and uncomfortably upright as grenadiers. In complete silence the new-comers were allowed to enter and seat themselves, and then Stella looked round in some astonishment, thinking that there did not seem to be much "mutual improvement" going on.

She was not long in discovering the cause of the constraint that evidently existed. Mr. Percy was seated at a table, making notes, and such a paralysing influence had his presence exerted upon the gentle members of the "Second Section," that not one of the timid creatures would have dared to utter three consecutive words, had her life depended on her doing so.

Stella was beginning to feel the infectious embarrassment creeping over her, and to wish that she had followed Belle's example, and let the society "improve" itself, without aid of hers, when Mr. Percy at last broke the solemn silence by inquiring whether, as Mrs. Percy was unable to fill her usual position, the ladies would prefer joining the young men in the schoolroom to being left to their own resources.

Dead silence. In vain the young minister's eyes wandered inquiringly from one embarrassed face to another; nobody—not even when he repeated the

question—opened her pretty lips to answer him Stella, overcome by the ludicrousness of the situation, and almost choking with suppressed laughter, thought that, as she was a stranger, it was not her business to come to the rescue; but when, after waiting some minutes, Mr. Percy put the interrogation a third time, with a precisely similar result, Stella thought it was really too bad, and so, making a tremendous effort to command her voice, she said—

“I, for one, sir, would rather stay here.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Percy said courteously. “Will the other ladies *please* express an opinion?”

Silence again; then two heads bobbed together, in the farthest corner of the room, and a smothered whisper of “Tell him so, then!” “No, you tell him!” was heard.

An amused smile curved the corners of Mr. Percy’s lips, and his eyes gleamed mirthfully, as he waited again with exemplary patience till a frightened-sounding voice, belonging to the owner of one of the heads, jerked out, in tones hardly above a whisper—

“We’d rather go in there!”

“Come, we’re getting on!” observed Mr. Percy. “Perhaps the best way will be to put it to the meeting—most of you will, I daresay, find courage enough to hold up your hands.”

The show of hands declared every girl, except Stella and another, to be in favour of adjourning to the schoolroom; and having ascertained their decision, Mr. Percy departed, to impart it to the masculine “Section,” and to superintend the preparation of the schoolroom for their reception.

Such a hubbub as there was the moment that man closed the door behind him! Every tongue was loosed now that the spell of his presence was removed, and made the most of the opportunity afforded it.

“I can’t bear the idea of going into the other room, with those young men,” Stella, thoroughly annoyed, said to Sarah Lynne. “I have a great mind to go home this minute.”

"Oh, don't be silly, Stella," was Miss Lynne's reply; "you can't do that, you know; it would look so."

"It wouldn't look worse than going in there—that looks as if we couldn't live through an evening without their assistance, and jumped at the opportunity of joining them! I don't like it a bit—running after young men in this way!"

"Who *is* running after them, I should like to know?" returned Miss Lynne, in an offended tone.

"Well, it looks like it, that's all," said Stella, as Mr. Percy returned, to say that the room was in readiness.

Feeling uncomfortably "small," Stella trotted along in the wake of the other girls, into the schoolroom—a feeling in no degree lessened when she discovered, as she speedily did, that her face seemed to be the centre of attraction to a pair of dark-brown eyes upon the other side of the room.

"Who is that impertinent fellow sitting next to young Harry Lennie?" she asked, in a whisper, at length.

Miss Lynne, to whom the question was addressed, glanced in the direction indicated.

"That—oh, that's 'Bennie,'" she said readily.

"No, not 'Bennie'—I know him very well—the one on the other side."

"Oh, John Cadburn, you mean. He's studying law at Wilford's."

"Oh." And Stella again turned her attention to Mr. Percy, who was "holding forth" at the moment.

It was raining hard at the close of the meeting. Neither of the two girls had provided herself with an umbrella, but Miss Lynne had accepted an offer of shelter from an acquaintance, and was already trudging along on her homeward way, and Stella was glancing down dismayfully at her light summer dress and thin shoes, and trying to summon up the requisite courage for a bold dash "between the drops," when a voice beside her said—

"Allow me to offer you an umbrella;" and, looking up in surprise, Stella encountered the same dark-

brown orbs which had so persistently regarded her during the evening. She drew back flushing.

"Thank you very much, but I could not think of trespassing so far upon your kindness," she said; and hesitating no longer, she started off at a rapid pace through the rain.

But she had not taken half a dozen steps before the stranger was again beside her; the umbrella was opened and held over her head, and she found herself almost compelled to accept the shelter.

Really grateful for the unexpected courtesy, Stella determined to make the best of existing circumstances; and by the time they reached Sylvester Hall, the two were laughing and chatting almost as if they had known each other from childhood.

With a low bow the young man left her at the front door, and Stella entered the house, feeling rather glad than otherwise that a new element had entered into her somewhat monotonous life.

She was assailed by a host of questions from Miss Lynne, as to how she had managed to get home, which she parried as best she could; but somehow the truth crept out, and then she had to endure a shower of raillery from the girls, good-natured raillery enough from some, but not untinged with malice from others. Stella bore it as patiently as she could for some time; and then beat an ignominious retreat to her room, to ruminate over the events of the evening, wonder whether she had made herself look supremely ridiculous, and scold herself vigorously because the hot blood would persist in rushing into her cheeks, whenever she recalled the look of undisguised admiration which she had so plainly seen in those brown eyes.

Somehow, after that, it very frequently happened that, in their rambles after school-hours, Stella and her friend used to meet the owner of the brown eyes—bright, handsome brown eyes they were, and set in a tolerably good-looking face—a fact of which John Cadburn was fully conscious. And yet those meetings seemed always to have been brought about by

chance—and Stella never dreamed that any other agency had been at work in the matter.

The first time, the young man apparently thought it necessary to make particular inquiries relative to Miss Martyn's health, and to "sincerely hope that she had received no injury through her exposure to the inclemency of the weather the other evening, etc., etc.;" and Stella, having given satisfactory replies, naturally expected him to make his *congé*, and take himself off. But that straightforward course of action did not seem to meet the young man's ideas of propriety; for, merely remarking that he had an engagement, which he had forgotten, in the direction in which the girls were going, he turned to accompany them in their walk—Stella's innate politeness forbidding her to object, though she was secretly annoyed.

"Quite a conquest, I declare," observed Miss Lynne, with a malicious smile, when Mr. Cadburn had at length uttered his final "Good evening," and the girls were again left to themselves.

"Nonsense," Stella said, rather shortly. And Miss Lynne contented herself with a sage remark, to the effect that "those who lived longest would see most."

There was no need for anybody to live very long after that to see that John Cadburn was, as Belle expressed it, "uncommonly sweet upon Stella Martyn." The long summer days passed away, gradually changing the acquaintance between them into friendship, and friendship ripening into a warmer feeling, in John Cadburn's heart, at least; but there was no word of love uttered between them—no thought of it, on Stella's part; though it had grown quite customary for John Cadburn to share her rambles. To be sure, she never met him alone; Miss Lynne was always with her; and his attentions at first were impartially distributed between the two girls. Lately, though, Sarah had come in for a very small share, and it is to be feared that John would gladly have dispensed with Miss Lynne's presence altogether, during those sunny, golden summer evenings.

And so things went on. And Stella drifted on and on, as girls do drift into such entanglements, without a thought of the ending—carelessly, foolishly negligent of aught save the present. Happy in the bright, pleasant to-day, she never dreamed how bitterly she might some day repent her folly.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### "LOVE CHARMS."

It was Hallow-e'en, and Belle Ashleigh's birthday, and the elder girls were all assembled in her room, to do her honour; for this was Belle's last "quarter" at Sylvester Hall, and she had determined to "have some fun."

Extensive preparations for this event had been going on surreptitiously for some days. Many were the secret expeditions to the pastry-cook's, and many the suspicious, don't-squeeze-me-too-tight-looking paper-bags that were smuggled into Sylvester Hall, under jackets, and even in umbrellas, and that eventually found their way into Belle's apartment; for that young lady enjoyed a liberal allowance of pocket-money, and was determined to "come out handsomely."

The chief difficulty had been the fire—for October nights are none of the warmest—and many anxious consultations had been held upon the subject—one girl proposing that a quantity of coal should be purchased at the dealer's, and brought away, a lump at a time, in their pockets; but it was decided that that plan presented too many obstacles to be adopted; and at length Susan, the housemaid, was pressed into the service—the bribe of a smart new ribbon procuring her silence and assistance—and the result was the bright, glowing little fire around which the girls, thoroughly resolved to "make a night of it," now

sat, roasting chestnuts, and "trying" all sorts of "love charms."

"Isn't it jolly?" said Belle, leaning forward, and carefully placing a couple of chestnuts upon the bars. "There—those two are Stella Martyn and John Cadburn. Now then, we shall see if their 'course of true love' is destined to 'run smooth.'"

"Better christen them 'Belle Ashleigh' and 'Cousin Tom, from China,'" suggested Stella, mischievously, though she flushed a little.

"Cousin Tom from China be—condemned to stay there!" retorted the young lady. "Don't mention that name, if you wish the harmony of this meeting to continue! It rouses all the evil propensities of my nature—what his actual presence will do, goodness knows!"

"You will know too, soon," responded Stella.

"Too soon, indeed!" ejaculated Belle, wilfully misunderstanding her. "Fancy it! I got a letter from my respected paternal this morning, and—he only sent it on purpose to spoil my birthday, I know—he says the wretch will actually be here by Easter, when he 'hopes to claim the fulfilment of my promise.' Promise, indeed! I never made one, and I can't be held responsible for any rash promises that my venerated dad—poor old soul, he must have been in his dotage, or he would never have acted in such a crack-brained fashion—may have chosen to make for me. Why shouldn't I enjoy my liberty, and make a free, unfettered choice, as other girls do?" quoth Belle, waxing indignant at the recollection of her wrongs. "What crime have I committed in some pre-existent state, that I should have my future destiny arranged for me, in my cradle, without being allowed to have a voice in the matter? I could cry, for pure spite, when I think of it! But I won't submit to such intolerable tyranny, I vow! I'll make good use of the few months I shall have in society before 'Cousin Tom' puts in an appearance, and I'll elope with some hare-brained younger son, the very day of his arrival—see if I don't!"

The girls laughed at Belle's method of getting out

of the difficulty, and Stella ventured to suggest that that would only be "jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire," and that the projected elopement should be deferred until the day after "Cousin Tom's" arrival, as he might possibly prove rather less formidable in *propria personæ* than in Belle's imagination.

"He won't—I know he won't!" returned Belle, shaking her head dismally; "I know he's a regular ogre—and I shouldn't wonder if he blacks his teeth, and wears a pigtail! I hope he does! I shall have an excuse for giving him 'notice to quit,' then: and it will serve my old dad just right, to have to superintend the *début* into civilised society of such a savage—such a horror as the dear old pater has of anything *outré*, too!"

"The mania for cradle-betrothals seems to run in our family," resumed Belle, after a pause, during which a plate of jam tarts had been handed round and "duly considered" by her guests. "There's Maude Thornton, now, in just such a fix as I am, and all because her old blockhead of a father took it into his head that he should like her to marry the son of his old friend, 'when both arrived at a suitable age;' and so, just to gratify the whim of a couple of addle-pated old noodles, she and Marmaduke Langley will have to make a match of it—whether they like it or no, I suppose."

"Marmaduke Langley?" echoed Stella.

"Yes, of course. Oh, to be sure, he's your guardian, isn't he? Didn't you know that he was engaged to Maude Thornton? It's no secret; they have been engaged ever since she was a baby and he a boy of nine. But she's luckier than I am, for she isn't to be married for a year or two."

"Is she pretty?" asked Stella, with quick interest in Marmaduke Langley's future wife. "She is your cousin, isn't she, Belle?"

"To be sure," answered Belle. "Pretty? Well, yes, rather—wait till you see her. You'll see her at Helstone, no doubt; I suppose you are going there, when you leave school, sometime?"



"No; I think not," Stella said, rather gravely.

"Not? Why, your guardian is very often there with his mother and sister! Well, will you come home to Craylands with me, and charitably try to win Cousin Tom's affections?—you may have him, and welcome, if you will, I'm sure."

"No, thank you," laughed Stella; "I haven't the least desire to embark in such a hopeless crusade."

"I wonder what 'Cousin Tom' will say, when he discovers that his *fiancée* has developed a talent for poetry, in his absence!" observed Lucy Clinton, leisurely cracking a little heap of walnuts in her lap.

"Poetry? Belle a poet?" cried several voices at once.

"That she is," said Lucy; "I have the MS. of a poem of hers in my pocket, this very minute. I happened to stumble over it only yesterday, amongst some of her papers that she gave me to look over. Shall I read it to you?"

"Yes, yes! let us hear it," was the eager response.

"You don't suppose I am going to have my poetry murdered by you?" demanded Belle, as Lucy, drawing a folded paper from her pocket, and indulging in a preliminary "Hem!" was about to commence reading. "Give it to Stella Martyn—she's the best reader amongst us. And mind, young woman," turning to Stella, "that you read it properly, and with all due emphasis! It's original," she added, quaintly.

"I should rather think it is!" said Stella, running her eye over the paper. "Here you have it, young ladies—

*Overhead, the gay laburnam  
Shook its tresses in the air;  
Gnats were dancing in the sunbeams,  
All the sky looked soft and fair.  
'Neath the tree there stood a lover,  
And a maid, with soft blue eyes.  
Fondly gazed the youth upon her,  
Gazed till he, with much surprise,*

*Heard a smothered exclamation,  
Saw her start, with gentle grace;*

*Saw a snow-white 'kerchief flutter  
Stealthily across her face.*

*"What, my darling, is the matter?"  
Asked the youth, in fond alarm.*

*"Tell me now, what grief assails thee?  
I will shield thee from all harm.*

*"Say what trouble weighs upon thee,  
Say what grieves thy tender heart!  
'Twill relieve thy burdened bosom—  
Consolation 'twill impart.*

*Say——" he paused; a silver tear-drop  
Gathered in her eyes so meek,  
Trembled on her long dark lashes,  
Fell adown her marble cheek.*

*"Tears!" he frantically uttered.*

*"Tell me, darling, why you cry!"*

*Is it——" "No," she faintly muttered,*

*"A—*a fly's* got in my eye!"*

"Bravo, Belle! What are you going to do with this literary gem?"

"Send it to 'Punch,'" replied Belle, promptly; "at least, I would, only I'm afraid the editor wouldn't appreciate its excellence, and you know it would be so awfully humiliating to have one's only poetical effort 'declined with thanks.'"

"So it would," agreed Stella. "So, perhaps, you had better not send it, for fear of such a catastrophe."

"And that's all the encouragement genius meets with in this cruel world!" sighed Belle, sentimentally, turning up her eyes. "Cold-hearted creature that you are! instead of inciting me to higher efforts, you——"

"Jump off the bars into the ashes," finished Stella, as her namesake chestnut, after a few preliminary starts and sputterings, hopped off the bar, with a loud bang, leaving "John Cadburn" roasting calmly alone.

"Just like your obstinacy," remarked Belle, bringing the tongs into requisition, in order to recover the fallen dainty. "Now why couldn't you have settled down comfortably beside him, instead of giving me the trouble to match you with somebody else?"

"Probably because his vicinity was getting too hot

for my taste," said Stella, smiling. "And you needn't trouble to 'match' me again, Belle—I've an idea that I shouldn't agree with anybody long on that bar."

"See if you can agree with that orange;" and Belle tossed one of the great round yellow balls into her lap.

"What a pity that we haven't got a pomegranate!" said Stella, gravely surveying the orange.

"A pomegranate! What for? I've got one in my room; but I daren't go and fetch it," said Lucy Clinton. "Why, what could we do with it?"

"Work an infallible spell," uttered Stella, mysteriously.

"Oh! What spell? Are you sure? How is it done?" demanded half a dozen eager voices at once; and half a dozen chairs were edged up a little nearer to the fire.

"There's no use in telling you, if we haven't got the pomegranate to try the spell with," said Stella.

"Oh, yes; let's hear what it is."

"Very well, then," Stella went on, with seeming reluctance. "A few minutes before midnight take a nice ripe pomegranate, cut it in half, and abstract twelve of the seeds—six from each half—then, just as the clock is striking twelve, you must eat the seeds—one at each stroke of the clock, mind."

"Yes, yes! What then?" and the chairs were drawn still closer together, and several pairs of eyes manifested a perverse inclination to glance over shoulders in the direction of the door.

"Why, then you must take another half-dozen of the seeds, and eat them, waiting five minutes between each one, and, precisely at half-past twelve, you will——"

"*What?*" murmured every voice, in a hushed, impatient whisper, as Stella, with a mischievous desire to excite the curiosity of her companions to the utmost, paused and looked round at their attentive faces.

"Have eaten exactly eighteen pomegranate seeds," she said, with slow solemnity, and with wicked enjoyment.

"Wretch!" cried Belle, aiming a piece of orange peel at Stella's laughing face. "To deceive six confiding hearts in that way! Why, I expected nothing less than the apparition of a lover as a *dénouement*."

"You must go to the 'Springing Stones' for lovers' apparitions, if you want them."

"So I will, if anybody will go with me. Will you go? Will you, Lucy?"

"Oh, I'm good for anything," responded the latter young lady. "Let's start directly."

The rest of the girls, if they were hardly willing to go, were very unwilling to be left behind, so hats and jackets were donned, and, five minutes afterwards, all were creeping, with stealthy, cat-like steps, down the stairs; the front door was cautiously opened, and presently the mad-cap troop stood upon the bridge spanning the "Springing Stones," a small stream, deriving its name from the fact that, previously to the erection of the bridge, the only means of crossing it was by a series of large stones, placed, either by accident or design, at such distances that the adventurous person wishing to cross was compelled to "spring" or leap from one to the other; and many were the unlucky wights who had come to grief through those treacherous "Springing Stones."

An uncanny reputation had that little river. Its banks were popularly supposed to be the favourite nocturnal promenade of a certain ghostly visitant, who indulged in the unaccountable and rather alarming habit of leaving his head at home, or, rather, in his coffin, whenever he felt disposed to quit that somewhat limited tenement in order to take an airing.

It was said, too, that, in one part of its course, and at a certain hour of three nights in the year, of which Hallow-e'en was one, the water possessed the magical power of revealing to any person who chose to peer into its depths the face of such person's future spouse. But few indeed of the young people of Cleighton would have risked the chance of coming across the aforementioned headless personage, even for the inducement held out by the magic stream.

"Who is going first?" asked Stella, as the girls stood upon the bridge, and gazed idly down into the water; "you, Belle?"

"No, thank you," said Belle; "I've seen my husband's face a good many times—in the looking-glass. I'll go next, though. You go first, Lucy."

But Miss Lucy shrank back in visible dismay. *Of course* she did not believe in "ghosts;" but still, such things *might* be, and it was quite as well to keep out of their way, if possible—a view of the case which seemed to be shared by the majority of her companions, for nobody volunteered to go first, nor, indeed, could one of them be persuaded to take such a step, except Stella, who, having neither fear of disembodied spirits, nor faith in the supposed result of the mystic spell, to deter her from the experiment, after a momentary hesitation, declared her readiness to lead the van.

It was a clear, cold, moonlit night; and springing over the low fence that separated the roadway from the meadow through which the streamlet ran, she walked rapidly over the crisp, frosted grass, her young blood tingling with excitement; for it *was* lonely certainly, after she had got out of hearing of the merry voices and gay laughter of her companions, with the calm, solemn moon illumining some spots, and casting deep, dark shadows in others, where the tall trees intercepted her beams.

At length she reached the sacred spot—a large stone, just reaching above the surface of the water, about three-quarters of a yard from the bank.

Maintaining her equilibrium with some difficulty, with a half-smile at her own folly wreathing her lips, she looked down into the translucent water, and saw—nothing at first, for a dark cloud at that moment obscured the moon, which emerged, however, in an instant, and then her own face looked back at her, and not only her own, but the reflection of another, dim and indistinct at first, but gradually growing clearer and more defined as she gazed, with a kind of fascinated horror, till at length there was fully

revealed a dark, thin face, with aquiline features and bright brown eyes, the face of John Cadburn !

Start—stagger—slip—slight shriek—splash ! and Stella was floundering in the water.

Fortunately, however, it was not very deep, and fortunately, too, there was a helping hand quickly extended to save her ; for John Cadburn, in actual flesh and blood, stood upon the bank, in such a position that the faithful natural mirror had, of course, reflected his face as clearly as though he stood beside her.

Dripping, and shivering with cold and terror, her gay spirits utterly subdued by this unlooked-for catastrophe, Stella, supported by John Cadburn's arm, stood upon the bank a few moments to recover her breath, almost unheeding the young man's regretful protestations, he reproaching himself for being the indirect cause of the accident.

"I can never forgive myself for having startled you so," he said, passionately, when she had recovered a little. "Believe me, it was done unintentionally. Do you feel better ?"—anxiously.

As well as her chattering teeth would let her, Stella tried to say that she felt well enough to walk home, and that she thought her best course, under the circumstances, would be to get there as quickly as possible ; in which opinion Mr. Cadburn fully concurred.

"Do you know why I came here to-night ?" he asked, as they proceeded towards the bridge as rapidly as the girl's trembling limbs would permit.

"No, how should I ?" she answered wearily, crimsoning, however, to the roots of her hair, as the recollection why *she* had been there flashed across her mind, and feeling almost ready to sink with shame that she should have been found on that spot, at that time of night, and for such a purpose ! What *would* John Cadburn think of her ?

"You hardly expected to find me here, I should think," she said, hurriedly, seized with a sudden desire to excuse herself, if possible, in his eyes ; "and it was

entirely owing to a girlish frolic that you did. None of the other girls could summon up enough courage to come any farther than the bridge, so I left them there, and came on alone. You must think me very foolish!"

"Indeed I do not—and if I did, what must you think of me? I cannot even plead in extenuation of my conduct that my visit to the 'Springing Stones' is the result of a 'girlish' or even of a boyish frolic. No, I certainly did not expect to see you here, I don't think I *expected* to see anything, and yet I was drawn hither by an irresistible impulse, urging me to consult this oracle, to see if it really possessed the power that tradition imputes to it, and, if it did, to ascertain what destiny had in store for me. Do you know, Stella, whose face I half hoped to see beside my own in the depths of the stream?"

"I am not gifted with the power of looking into other people's minds, and discovering their secret wishes," she said, confusedly, desirous of treating his words as a jest, yet too thoroughly unnerved to adopt the bantering tone with which she would ordinarily have answered them.

"Does not your womanly intuition supply the place of that gift?" said the young man, speaking rapidly and passionately, "or must I tell you that I would rather have seen your face than any other in the world? Stella, if I *had* seen it, would the oracle have spoken truly?"

"No—I don't know—how can I tell?" uttered the girl, startled and half frightened at his vehemence. "I never thought of such a thing!"

"But you can think of it—you will think of it, Stella?" he pleaded, eagerly.

Stella shook her head.

"I—I don't want to think about it," she said in an agitated tone. "It has been very pleasant to have your friendship, John—why can't we always be friends, just as we have been?"

"Friends!" echoed the young man, scornfully. "And so you have led me on all this time just to

tell me this at last? Why couldn't you tell me before?"

"I couldn't tell you that I wouldn't marry you before you asked me, could I?" cried Stella, passionately, her spirit rising under a sense of his injustice. "Besides, I tell you I never thought of it! Led you on! You are unkind, ungenerous, to seize such a time as this to press such a subject upon me," she added, calming down a little. "A girl who is freezing"—and she glanced down at her stiffening garments—"doesn't feel very much inclined for sentiment;" and the absurdity of the position proving too much for Stella's sense of fun, her low laugh rippled out musically upon the frosty air.

"Perhaps my declaration was a little ill-timed," admitted her companion, with a half-smile, realizing that he had only injured his cause by his impetuosity. "See, there are your friends, coming to look after you."

All Belle's lively sallies, during the remainder of the walk home, failed to procure anything but uninterested rejoinders from Stella. Silent and thoughtful, she kept persistently by Miss Ashleigh, while Sarah Lynne promptly took possession of her vacated place beside Mr. Cadburn.

The details of the conversation that ensued between those two, history doth not record; but John Cadburn's face soon brightened considerably, and he went to bed that night with the programme for his mode of procedure in the immediate future fully arranged, and with the firm conviction that only natural shyness and agitation had prevented Stella from at once accepting his suit.

And Stella placed her head upon her pillow in a maze of troubled uncertainty with regard to her own feelings, and with only one point standing out in clear relief against the dark background of perplexity—that her present friendship with John Cadburn had come to an abrupt conclusion, and that she must henceforth avoid him.

It is a curious fact that a young girl can very rarely summon up enough courage to utter a decided "No"



to her first lover ; and that, whether she really cares for him, or whether the sentiment that he has awakened is only one of gratified vanity, if she is compelled to dismiss him, the sentence of banishment is never pronounced without genuine regret ; therefore, a first lover, if he possesses a tolerable amount of perseverance, though he may labour under many disadvantages otherwise, has a much better chance of ultimate success than any who may succeed him.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### “ WE HAVE BEEN FRIENDS.”

PLEASE to seat yourself for one instant upon the storyteller's magic tapestry, and let me transport you to a tiny boat, rocking gently upon the blue translucent waves of the magnificent world-famed Bay of Naples, with her one snow-white sail flapping lazily in the faint breeze which languidly fanned the faces of her occupants—three gentlemen, one apparently about forty years of age, whose clerical costume and grave face sufficiently proclaimed his calling. The other two had a much more youthful appearance, neither of them, in fact, having numbered more than twenty-five years, though the features of the one who was managing the helm wore a hard, cynical expression that would better have befitted one twice his age.

Handsome he was, with a dark, pale face, surrounded by thick black whiskers, while a heavy moustache almost concealed his mouth ; but his was not a face to invite confidence or attract regard. There was, at times, something almost repelling in the flashing, restless black eyes that were now fixed upon the younger of his two companions, who, half-sitting, half-reclining upon a cushion in the bottom of the boat, was gazing contemplatively at a mass of light fleshy clouds that enveloped the summit of Vesuvius.

"Beautiful, beautiful Italy!" he murmured musingly, his eyes wandering at length to the fair city, bathed in the rosy light of the setting sun; and then, turning round with a half-sigh, he encountered the intent gaze of the other.

"You are laughing at my enthusiasm, Ludovico," he said, flushing slightly.

"Ah, no!" said the young man addressed as Ludovico, with an unmistakably foreign intonation, while his face kindled with natural pride. "Ah, no, Signor! Is she not my own country—my own beautiful Italy? Nay, Signor, I wonder not, much less laugh, at your admiration."

"My own country!" repeated the first speaker. "After all, though other climes may be fairer and more lovely, yet one's own country must always be the best and the dearest. I admire, I love this sunny, smiling land, but my heart yearns with a strange longing for my own ancestral home. Ludovico, I wish you could see my home!" he added, smiling up into the brilliant eyes above him.

"I can, Signor," said the young Italian, with a slight, peculiar smile; "so often have you described it, that it needs not a vivid imagination to conjure up the picture."

"Ah, but I mean in reality, Ludovico. I wish I could persuade you to accompany us to England when we return."

"Ah, no, Signor; I can never, never leave Italy," was the somewhat sad reply.

"But for a little while, Ludovico?" urged the other. "Surely, for a little while Italy can spare you?"

The peculiar expression deepened for a moment, then it vanished, as Ludovico answered briefly—

"You are very kind, Signor Edouard; but it cannot be."

"Ah, then," laughed "Signor Edouard," "you have some other attraction in this fair land. Italy herself has not woven the spell that binds you, but the charms of one of her bright-eyed daughters!"

The pale cheek of the Italian flushed, but he made no reply ; and, turning to the clerical-looking gentleman, and dropping his bantering tone, "Signor Edouard" observed—

"Mr. Grantham, what would you say if I told you that I had resolved upon returning to England?"

"Is your health sufficiently established?" asked Mr. Grantham, anxiously.

"I think so, my dear sir. Of course I don't mean to hurry home as fast as boat and rail will take us ; but only to set our faces in that direction, and proceed leisurely onwards till we once more behold the 'white cliffs of Albion.'"

"I, too, shall be glad to behold them," said Mr. Grantham. "Are the letters (may I ask?) which you received this morning the cause of this sudden resolution?"

"Partly," answered Edward. "I hardly like the tone of my father's letter. He says he is not quite so well as usual, and I fear he would not say that, unless he was much worse. Do you believe in presentiments, Mr. Grantham?"

"Certainly not," returned that gentleman, promptly and energetically.

"I do, in a measure, and I feel just now as though some evil were impending over me—some terrible, dire calamity that will delay my seeing Helstone and my kind old father. Dear, dear father! I feel as if I shall never see your kindly, loving face again!" he added, mournfully.

"My dear Edward, I trust you are alarming yourself unnecessarily," said Mr. Grantham, cheerfully, anxious to divert the young man's thoughts. "You had other letters, I believe: if your father had been seriously unwell, surely some one of your friends would have mentioned it."

"I think so too, sir, or I would start for England this minute. Only sometimes this feeling of anxious foreboding almost overpowers me,—just now, for instance."

"I believe it is owing to the excessive nervous

irritability from which you suffer. You must try to conquer it, Edward."

"Of course, sir." There was a shadow of impatience in the young man's tone, though his manner was perfectly respectful.

"By what route shall we return?" asked Mr. Grantham, presently.

"I have not decided, sir. Have you any preference?" said Edward, lazily rising, and placing himself beside Ludovico, in such a position that both profiles were almost in a line with Mr. Grantham's vision.

"Certainly no—— Bless me, how remarkable!"

The young men turned round simultaneously to the gentleman, who was staring at them with wide open mouth and eyes.

"What is the matter, sir?" Edward inquired, in some alarm. "Are you ill?"

"No, only—bless me, how strange that I never noticed it before!"

"Noticed what, Mr. Grantham?"

"The resemblance between you," the tutor explained, recovering in some degree from his astonishment. "Why, I declare you might almost be brothers! It is marvellous,—astounding!"

Standing thus, side by side, there certainly was a striking resemblance between the two young men, especially in the general form and contour of the face, though the extreme fragility and delicacy of Edward Langley's features rendered the likeness less apparent than it would otherwise have been. His complexion, too, was several shades fairer than Ludovico's, and his eyes, though large and dark, were destitute of the flashing brilliance which characterised the other's, and which is so rarely seen, save among the children of the "sunny south." Seen apart, with only memory to rely upon as a guide to decision, these subtle distinctions would have passed unnoticed, and it would have been hard for one not intimately acquainted with him to decide which was and which was not Edward Langley of Helstone Priory.

"Si, Signor," observed the Italian, "it is so. I have

known it this some time. We are much alike; but Signor Edouard's features have not the older, careworn expression of mine."

"Couldn't you have put a few crows' feet and wrinkles into the catalogue?" laughed Edward. "Poor old fellow! Time must indeed have pressed heavily upon you, my 'careworn' friend."

"Ah! not time alone, but stern necessity—terrible sorrow!" murmured the young Italian, gravely. "Signor Edouard, not more years have I numbered than yourself, but I have lived twice as much in those years as you have."

Edward held out his hand with a quick wish to atone for the seeming thoughtlessness of his words, murmuring, as the soft, velvety fingers of the Italian closed round his own with a grip of iron—

"Pardon me, Ludovico; I did not mean to wound you."

"Signor Barolezzi is right," observed Mr. Grantham, who never addressed the young Italian as "Ludovico;" "he is much older than yourself, Edward; older in heart, older in brain, if not in actual years. Too old for me," he added, in an undertone. "I wish I didn't distrust the fellow as I do; but I can't help it."

One would have thought, from the look that Ludovico flashed at him, that he had understood the tutor's muttered words, and resented them accordingly.

"My experience hitherto has been too pleasant to have aged me much," remarked Edward, thoughtfully. "Too pleasant, perhaps. Life cannot be all sunshine; even now the shadows may be gathering—I feel as if they were," he added, with a slight shiver.

"What a glorious sunset!" observed Mr. Grantham, after a pause, fixing his eyes upon the declining King of Day. "We shall have a breeze presently, I think."

And even as he spoke Ludovico sprang to the helm, a light wind filled the snowy sail, and a moment afterwards the tiny craft was skimming over the gleaming waves as buoyantly and gracefully as a sea-gull.

"The signor will not forget that he has promised to visit my home among the mountains before he returns

to his own land?" asked Ludovico, anxiously, as he parted with the two Englishmen, at the entrance of the small, but elegant white villa which they occupied during their stay in Naples.

"No, certainly not," replied Edward, promptly. "Let me see, this is Friday: we will start for your home on Monday, Ludovico."

Surely there was something more than mere pleasure at the idea of welcoming his friends to his own home in the gratified, almost triumphant, smile that played round the young Italian's lips, as he turned and slowly wended his way to a small wine shop in the vicinity of the San Carlos.

Entering, he addressed a rapid question, in Italian, to the bright-eyed damsel whose business it was to dispense the much-loved beverage, and, receiving an equally rapid reply, descended a flight of stone steps at the back of the shop, and, after traversing a long narrow passage, found himself in a small, low-ceiled, vault-like apartment. Its only occupant, a dark, ferocious-looking man, with coarse, unkempt black locks hanging over his little sinister eyes, looked up surlily as Ludovico entered.

"Ugh! So you have come at last?" he said, by way of greeting, his harsh voice making discord even of the musical Italian in which he spoke. "About time, I think!"

Ludovico's dark eyes flashed angrily, but he answered softly, "Patience, my Gaspar; our reward is coming swiftly now."

"It's all very well for you to preach patience," growled Gaspar; "you are having a pleasant life of it, playing the gentleman and taking your pleasure—of course you wouldn't be in a hurry—but I am getting tired of your absence, and so is my lady Katrina."

"Tell her I shall soon return," said Ludovico, with a darkening brow. "The bird will be snared in a few days at the utmost."

"Its feathers ought to be worth something," returned Gaspar, grimly; "we've waited long enough for 'em."

"They are worth waiting for," was the brief reply. "How is Francisco?"

"As near dead as can be—just breathing, that's all—can't last over to-morrow, I should think. Poor fellow! that Frenchman's sabre made an ugly gash across his face. Confound it! but I hate to lose a comrade in that way," said Gaspar, drawing his breath savagely.

"It is unfortunate," said Ludovico's smooth tones. "Francisco was a brave fellow. We shall miss him; but we must try and turn his death to our own advantage, if possible, my trusty Gaspar. You are sure he will not live over Sunday?"

"Francisco—Santissima Maria have mercy on his soul!—will be gone long ere then."

"Very well, then—listen, my Gaspar."

The two heads were bent in close proximity for several minutes, and a hurried whispered conversation ensued. At its close, Ludovico rose to depart.

"You are sure you understand?" he asked again, before quitting the apartment.

"Si, Signor; your instructions shall be carried out to the letter."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Edward, do not you think it will be unwise to proceed farther to-night?" said Mr. Grantham, a few days later.

They were proceeding, in company with Ludovico, to pay the promised visit to the home of the latter, and the shades of evening found them among the rocky recesses of the Apennines. They were accompanied by a guide who professed himself perfectly acquainted with the route. A small open glade, with a tiny stream trickling through it, attracted Mr. Grantham's attention, and he at once proposed camping there for the night, but the proposition met with general disfavour.

"We will rest a little while, dear sir, to refresh exhausted nature," Edward said, gaily. "Then, when the moon rises to light us on our rugged way, we will, with your kind permission, proceed on our journey. It will be so delightful to travel by moonlight, and

amid such romantic scenery. Don't you think so, sir?"

"Delightful for your young blood, no doubt," responded Mr. Grantham, shaking his head; "but, at my age, 'romance' suggests 'rheumatics.'"

"And you think sleeping on the grass less provocative of that ailment than travelling all night?" laughed Edward.

"There is no need for Signor Grantham to sleep on the grass," suggested Ludovico. "If we travel for another hour, we shall meet a little—what you call it?—house; and then he will not have the roomatic."

"But the brigands? I believe we are nearing a part of the mountains which is reported to be infested by them," remonstrated the tutor.

"There will be no more danger farther on than here," Ludovico's soft voice assured him—Ludovico's eyes the while glancing searchingly around.

"Very well—as you will, Edward. Why Edw——"

The half-uttered exclamation was arrested by a rough hand being suddenly thrust over his mouth—and, in a twinkling, the astonished tutor was dragged from his mule, bound, gagged, and blindfolded, while his companions were also maltreated in a similar manner.

The little party of travellers had actually walked right into a cleverly contrived ambush. While engaged in conversation, they had been cautiously surrounded by half a score of stalwart, burly ruffians, dressed in the approved brigand style, with formidable-looking pistols and knives sticking out of their belts, who, at a preconcerted signal, rushed simultaneously upon the unwary travellers, who, unprepared for the sudden attack, were, of course, speedily overmastered.

A few minutes sufficed to rifle the captives of whatever valuables they possessed. Edward Langley's pockets, however, seemed to be objects of particular attention to the leader of the gang, who happened to be no other than our worthy Gaspar, and whose search was rewarded with a card case, containing several cards,



of course bearing the young man's name and address, a pocket-book marked with the initials "E. L.," and a handkerchief, also bearing the same initials.

Somehow the bandage upon Edward's eyes got loosened, and at this stage of the proceedings he was able to look around him.

The young moon shed a faint uncertain light upon the scene. His tutor and the guide were seated upon the ground, with their backs leaning against a tree, to which they were both securely fastened; Ludovico was nowhere within the range of his vision. But, lying upon the grass, a few feet from him, was a silent motionless figure, so silent, so motionless, that Edward's gaze was riveted to it, and he almost believed it to be the form of a dead man, a young man, as nearly as he could judge, about his own height and build. It was dressed in a light-grey tourist's suit, precisely similar to the one he was himself wearing.

One of the men, however, happening inadvertently to touch the recumbent figure with his foot, its position was slightly changed, and the face was brought into the full view of the young man.

A shuddering, sickening horror crept over him at the ghastly sight. Bruised, dirt-stained, the features mangled almost out of all semblance to humanity, and with a terrible gash crossing from the left temple to the right side of the chin, it was indeed a blood-chilling spectacle. What was Edward Langley's amazement, when he saw the villain who had robbed him, kneel down beside the body, and place the articles abstracted from his own pockets in those of the corpse! He was lost in a maze of conjecture as to the possible motive for such an action, no explanation suggesting itself to his bewildered mind.

Presently he was again placed upon his mule, and a couple of brigands, stationing themselves one on either side of him, in obedience to a signal from Gaspar, prepared to lead the animal away. In an agony of apprehension, Edward strove, struggled madly to utter a cry that would apprise his tutor of his fate. In vain, in vain! no sound escaped his parched lips, and,

in unspeakable anguish of spirit, he was led away, whither he knew not.

A backward glance, just as he was turning the corner of a huge boulder, revealed two of the men in the act of removing the bandages from the eyes of his tutor and the guide; and then his physical strength seemed suddenly to forsake him, and he fainted.

He recovered consciousness in a long, low room, dimly lighted by a couple of wax candles, placed in tin sconces, fixed to the wall. A rude table ran down the length of the apartment, and round it were seated about a dozen men, who, laughing and talking boisterously, were doing ample justice to the provisions which they had found among the travellers' luggage.

During his insensibility Edward's fetters had been removed, and he once more had the free use of his limbs. Ludovico was standing beside him, and he too was at liberty.

A few moments Edward Langley lay passive and quiet, his head aching, and his brain dizzy and whirling, as he tried to remember what had brought him into his present position. Suddenly it all flashed back upon him. He sprang to his feet.

"Men!" he cried, in a clear, ringing voice, "what is the meaning of this outrage?"

In an instant all were upon their feet, talking and gesticulating wildly; then Gaspar separated himself from the throng, and came towards him.

"Please to be quiet, Signor," he said, coolly. "No harm is intended you; but we shall keep you here as a guest for a little time, in fact, until we can communicate with your friends, and come to some arrangement with them regarding your ransom."

"Give me my liberty, and I will solemnly promise to pay you any sum that you may choose to ask, no matter how exorbitant," exclaimed Edward, eagerly.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," was the grim reply. "We must have the reward in our hands before we let you go."

"But I will give you more, far more, than you could hope to extort from my friends," returned Edward.

A grim smile was the only answer.

"Well, then," Edward persisted, "give me pen and ink at once, that I may inform my friends of my position without delay."

"No, that won't do at all," was Gaspar's decided answer.

"Why not?" asked the astonished Edward.

"Why, you see," vouchsafed Gaspar, with cool effrontery, "we mean your friends to think you dead for a time, then we can make a good round sum by bringing you to life again, you know, Signor."

"They will not think me dead," said Edward, quickly.

"Oh, yes, they will; we left poor Francisco lying out there, and his body will be mistaken for yours, especially as the supposed proofs of his identity will be found on him."

"Then don't you see how difficult you will find it afterwards to substantiate your assertion that I still live?" queried Edward, with desperate calmness.

"We shall find some way out of that hole, never fear," returned the man, carelessly. "All you have to do is to be quiet, and patiently bide our time for giving you your liberty. And, Signor"—laying his hand significantly upon the hilt of his dagger, "there are a dozen of these trusty fellows—each would be raised were you to try to escape; if you value your life, you will not attempt it."

"Fiends!" cried the young man, with bitter indignation. "Oh! my poor father! the news will break his heart! Surely, surely these men cannot be so heartless!" and with a groan he sank back, and covered his face with his hands.

At this juncture a curtain that hung at the far end of the apartment was hastily put aside, and a young girl, in the picturesque garb of the Italian peasantry, appeared.

A glad cry broke from her lips as her eye fell upon Ludovico; and springing forward, she threw herself upon his neck in an ecstasy of joy.

"Ah, my beloved!" she murmured, in her soft,

liquid Italian. "You have, then, come back to your Katrina, my heart's delight!"

The young man allowed her to caress him for a moment, without responding to her enthusiasm, except by one hasty kiss upon her forehead, then unclasping the girl's clinging arms from his neck, he said, in a low, hurried tone—

"That will do now, Kattie dear. Don't you think you could find me some supper?"

The girl drew back with an air of wounded affection.

"Ah! then you do not care to see your Katrina," she said, sadly.

A half-impatient expression flitted across Ludovico's face.

"Nonsense, Katrina!" he chided her. "Do not be so foolish, child! Of course I am very glad to see you again; but you see I have brought a guest"—with a slight inclination of his head toward Edward Langley—"and it would, to say the least of it, be in questionable taste to entertain him with a rapturous matrimonial scene. Besides, we are both hungry; let us have some supper in your own apartment as quickly as possible."

Only half satisfied with this explanation of his coldness, the young girl again lifted the curtain, and disappeared behind it, while Ludovico returned to his former position beside Edward.

"Do not be thus overcome," he said, soothingly, laying his hand upon the other's arm. "We must bear it with patience, Signor Edouard—the effect on your father need not be what you fear."

Edward lifted his head, and gazed drearily into Ludovico's face; his lips moved, but no sound issued from them; and presently his head sank again.

Obedying a sign from Ludovico, Gaspar again approached him.

"Help me lift the signor into the Lady Katrina's boudoir," commanded Ludovico.

Between them they carried their now unresisting captive into a small inner room, which was far more

luxuriously furnished than the other. Placing him upon a softly cushioned lounge, the men withdrew, and left him to his own agonising reflections, from which he was soon aroused by the appearance of the supper-tray, laden with dainties.

Edward forced himself to swallow a few morsels of the food; and then he was conducted, with effusive politeness, to another chamber, containing a heap of cushions and two or three blankets. Wearily, the young man threw himself upon the cushions, and drew the blankets around him. He heard the click of the key in the lock—dissipating whatever hopes of escape he might have entertained—as Gaspar closed the door upon him; and, notwithstanding an impression that the correct thing to do under the circumstances was to lie awake all night, his eyes closed, and presently he was in a troubled slumber—sound enough, however, not to be broken by the entrance of Ludovico, who, lamp in hand, crept cautiously into the chamber, and for a while stood looking down at the flushed, working features of the sleeper.

“It would have been safest, best, to have killed him outright!” he muttered. “Shall I—shall I finish the work now?” and his hand nervously, undecidedly, crept towards the handle of his knife. “No! no! poor boy, he has been very kind to me; I cannot harm him now!” and, with a shudder, he turned away.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### IRRITATING—TO SAY THE LEAST OF IT.

“THERE you are, dreaming over a book, as usual!” exclaimed Miss Lynne, pouncing upon Stella, one sultry June evening, in the summer after that eventful Hallowe’en, as she was enjoying a delicious lounge upon the grass, under the patriarchal old apple-tree, her book her only companion, though, to tell the

truth, she had not for some time been studying its pages; she was thinking of the letter, with its sad tale of bereavement and sorrow, which she had received some time back from Mrs. Langley, and which she had read again, for the fiftieth time, that afternoon.

"No words of mine"—the letter ran—"can describe the scene at Helstone—the incredulous consternation, the wild, bitter lamentations, with which the news of poor Edward's assassination was received. Everybody loved him, poor fellow! he was so generous and affectionate, that he won all hearts; his place in my affections was second only to that filled by my own children. His poor father entirely sank under the blow; he had suffered from heart-disease for years, and his health had been exceedingly delicate for some time past; the cruel tidings broke his heart—he only lived three days after the receipt of the telegram.

"What effect the news has had on my poor Duke I dare not imagine—for he and Edward were always more like brothers than cousins; I know he will not easily recover from the shock. And the poor old man—Mr. Grantham—the ordeal of that awful night in the Apennines has destroyed his reason. Fastened as he was to a tree, with the moonlight clearly revealing the form and mutilated features of one whom he dearly loved, and whom he was utterly powerless to help, even had the cruel villains not completed their horrible work—can you fancy anything more agonising? Duke writes me that he found him at—I forget the name of the place now—under the care of an old peasant, in a state of, he fears, hopeless idiocy—quiet and harmless, but as helpless as a child.

"Duke was at some outlandish place where neither letter nor telegram could reach him at the time of the murder. When the news at last reached him, he hastened as quickly as possible to Naples, to investigate the matter, but of course he did not arrive there till long after the date of the crime; and the remains

of the unfortunate youth had been committed to the grave. But Duke has had them disinterred, and is now, I believe, upon his way home with them and poor Mr. Grantham. I hope to see him next week, though I am afraid it will not be for more than a day or two, as I expect he will be rushing off again as soon as our dear Edward is laid in his final resting-place—the family vault at Helstone.

“Of course the title and estates now revert to Duke; but I would far, far rather that he should never have inherited them, than that they should come to him through such an unexpected and painful calamity.”

The letter closed with the usual kind expressions of interest in the young girl.

“Dreaming over a book, as usual!” repeated Miss Lynne. “I can’t think what in the world you want to know so much for!”

“Knowledge is power,” quoted Stella, absently, forgetting for the moment to whom she was speaking.

“Is it? You’ll have power enough by-and-by, then, if you keep on at this rate. Power! what kind of power, I wonder? It strikes me, that a pretty face has more power than all the knowledge that was ever crammed into anybody’s brains,”—this last with a conscious smile.

“Over men’s hearts—yes, I suppose so,” said Stella lightly. “But you see, Sarah, I can never put forward any pretensions to that kind of power, so don’t you think I am wise in trying to acquire the power that knowledge gives, even if it is of an inferior quality?”

“What nonsense you talk, Stella!” said Miss Lynne, with a toss of her drab curls.

“Then my books have done me no harm at present,” remarked Stella, quietly. “So, as your chief objection to my reading—the fear that I may become too wise—is removed, I will, with your permission, go back to them.”

“No, you don’t!” and seizing the book that Stella had again taken up, Sarah sent it spinning across the

grass. "I promised John Cadburn that we would go out to-night."

"Well, I didn't," said Stella, half vexed, and half laughing.

"Well, I did—and out we go. Now, are you ready?"

"No," answered Stella, calmly, throwing herself back upon the grass, and closing her eyes.

"You had better be. You won't see him again for a good while, you know."

"No!" said Stella, with a trifle more energy in her manner. "How do you know, Sarah?"

"Oh, I saw him this morning, and he told me that he had a tiff with Mr. Wilford, and that he is going away to-morrow. So come along."

But the momentary fire had died out of Stella's eyes.

"I don't care," she said, languidly closing them again; "I'm not going out in this heat for anybody. Do be patient, there's a good girl, and wait till it's fit for anybody who isn't a salamander or a native of the tropics to exercise her locomotive powers."

"How aggravating you are, Stella!" exclaimed Miss Lynne, in disgust. "Pray how long do you mean to keep him waiting? The heat is as bad for him as for you."

"Quite," agreed Stella, "if he's out in it. But if he is wise he won't be, he'll stay at home and keep as cool as he can; and if he isn't wise, I don't want anything to do with him."

"I daresay you mean that as a hint for me," said Sarah, with a decided elevation of her nasal organ. "But I'm quite as wise as I want to be, and if my company isn't good enough for you, there are plenty that would be glad of it."

"I don't doubt that assertion for a moment," said Stella, lazily.

Stella was not a very lively companion for any one, least of all Miss Lynne, during the next hour. But, as we have said, that young lady had no objection to such a state of things, and the rivulet of her speech



trickled on and on unceasingly. Stella lay back among the long grass, with her dark eyes gazing dreamily up, up into the deep blue vault of heaven, thinking how much she would like a pair of strong pinions that would bear her away—away up through that beautiful, infinite, azure canopy; and it was with a feeling something akin to impatience that she at length obeyed Miss Lynne's imperative tug at her arm, and brought her ideas down to the present and—John Cadburn.

John Cadburn had been very cautious and circumspect during the months that had elapsed since his former ill-advised declaration. With quiet tact he had contrived to slip again into his old place—that of a valued friend—never making even the remotest allusion to the subject which had then been broached; so entirely did he ignore it, that it almost seemed as if he had utterly forgotten it.

Almost, not quite; for there was visible in his manner a half-sad, half-reproachful air of subdued tenderness, which—as it was meant to do—sometimes cut poor unsophisticated Stella to the heart, and impressed her with an uneasy feeling that she had treated him very badly, and that the least she could do in the way of reparation was to try and think favourably of his offer.

Thus the time had passed away, gradually familiarising her to the possibility of her becoming John Cadburn's wife at some very far distant day; and so when, in the dreamy calm of this summer evening, with the silver moon smiling down upon them, the young man again urged his suit in tender, impassioned words, the idea no longer startled her as it had done before, and she hesitated, trembling, uncertain what to say.

They were standing upon the steps of Cleighton Cross, looking down upon the quiet, sleepy town. Stella never forgot that scene; it imprinted itself upon her memory, never to be effaced.

The quaint, irregular old street, bathed in the pure, pale moonbeams; the curious, picturesque shadows thrown across it by the peaked roofs and gables of the

houses, whose diamond-paned windows gleamed like jewels as they reflected back the moon rays; the ivy-clad church, with its grand old steeple—Stella had seen it all before, but never, she thought, had it looked so peacefully beautiful as it did to-night, and never had she so revelled in its beauty as she had done this evening, until John Cadburn spoke the fatal words which had broken the entrancing spell.

"I hoped that you had changed your mind, that you no longer wished me to look upon you in that light," she said gently, at length.

"I am not so changeable as you suppose," answered her companion. "My sentiments towards you, Stella, are incapable of change. Stella"—and the low-toned voice became sad and pleading—"I am going away to-morrow; has our friendship been so barren of all pleasure to you that you can see me go with indifference? that you do not care whether you ever see me again?"

"No," Stella said, with a keen pang of regret; "I do care,—I care very much, John."

"Then, if you refuse me this time, I will never see you again in this world—never!" cried the young man, hotly; "and when we meet at the bar of judgment, I will rise up against you, and condemn you, and bear witness that your coldness and cruelty have ruined me, and wrecked my life by laying its fairest hopes in ruins—Stella, I will."

The girl shrank back, white and trembling, against the railing that encircled the cross.

"You are mad, John!" she shuddered, glancing up at his pale, set face, while the demon-heads above her seemed to her excited fancy to be mocking and mowing at her, and gnashing their grinning teeth in horrible silent laughter.

"Mad!" echoed the young man. "Yes, perhaps I am; I am hardly sane, I know, where you are concerned. Stella, must I go away without the consolation of thinking that the parting is only for a time, and that I may relieve the tedium of the interval by writing to you, and hearing from you?"

"You can write to me, of course," Stella faltered ; "and I will answer your letters."

"Pshaw !" exclaimed John, impatiently. "What a child you are, Stella ! Of course I couldn't, or rather, I wouldn't write to you, unless some definite understanding existed between us. I couldn't write to you in a mere friendly way ; I couldn't restrain myself,—such a strain as I have endured for the last six months would, if continued, drive me mad, I am certain of it. Stella, have pity !"

Touched, thrilled to the heart's core by the misery in his white, haggard face, the girl leaned forward, and placed her small white hand upon his.

"What can I say ?" she murmured. "John, I do pity—I respect, I esteem you, but I do not think I love you. You surely would not care for my promise without love ?"

"Yes, I would, I would !" he cried, eagerly, clasping the hand that rested upon his own ; "because, if you promised to marry me, you would try to love me ; and you would succeed in time, you could not help it. I would love you so, worship you so, that you must love me in return ! Stella, Stella, say yes !"

"Ye-e-s," she said, slowly, and in a bewildered sort of way, as if repeating a lesson imperfectly learned.

She would have given anything she possessed in the world, could she only have recalled that "yes" when, five minutes later, she reached her own room, and with a complete revulsion of feeling dropped down, trembling with excitement, into a chair, to think over what she had done.

Removed from the influence which the presence of her lover exerted upon her, free from the spell of his pleading, passionate eyes, she began to realise the folly of which she had been guilty. But it was too late now for repentance ; she had given her word, and she must abide by it, at any cost to herself.

So she told herself ; and then she wondered, with a curious, unaccountable shrinking away from the idea of telling them of it, what Mrs. Langley and Marmaduke would say to her engagement, and half hoped

that they would refuse to sanction it. But of that there was little chance; they would be sure to approve. In a very good position, respectably connected, and with an unblemished reputation, John Cadburn surely was quite as good a "match" as her mother's daughter had any right to expect, or could ever hope to secure, even though she had been lifted by the kindness of her friends out of her original sphere in life.

And then Stella fell to wondering vaguely what would have been her lot if she had been left in that sphere; if Duke's pitying kindness had never reached her in her misery and forlornness; if the poor desolate little waif of humanity had been left, as many such stray atoms are left, to fight the battle of life alone, untaught, unpitied, uncared-for, struggling, begging, stealing, for a morsel of bread, or, worse still, growing up into a smirched, stained womanhood, leading a life of shameful crime.

Stella shuddered as the thought of what she might have been but for Marmaduke's active benevolence forced itself upon her mind, while her heart swelled with a rush of grateful feeling, and her trembling lips parted with the whispered prayer that she might never, never give those true friends cause to regret their kindness to her, and that she might be all that they would have her be, and deserved that she should be.

A little cautious knock at the door startled her, and before she had time to bid the intruder enter it opened and admitted Sarah Lynne, in dressing-gown and list slippers.

"Not in bed yet?" she said, closing the door behind her. "I suppose your thoughts are so pleasant that you couldn't sleep, if you tried."

"They are not particularly pleasant."

"Oh, I forgot that you are to lose your lover to-morrow. Where is he going to?"

"Really, I forgot to inquire."

"You mean you won't tell me. Are you afraid that I might write to him, and win him away from you?"

asked Miss Lynne, a disagreeable smile curling her thin lips.

"Not at all ; I should hardly expect a letter to be more potent than your actual presence," Stella answered, carelessly.

A dull flush rose to Miss Lynne's cheek. She stood still a moment, biting her lip, and looking down at the floor.

"So you have accepted him ?" she said at last. "I thought you wouldn't be fool enough to let a chance like that slip by you ; you won't get such another in a hurry !"

"There are as good fish in the sea as have ever been caught," quoted Stella, lightly ; wondering, however, how Sarah happened to know the result of her interview with her lover.

"Very likely ; but they won't rise to Stella Martyn's bait," answered Sarah, maliciously.

"I do not understand you, Sarah," Stella said, a little proudly, for the other's tone was almost insulting significant. "What do you mean ?"

"Nothing ; only"—Miss Lynn was preparing to leave the room, and she paused, with her hand on the door, and looked furtively at Stella, that she might not lose the effect of the sting which her words were intended to convey—"only it isn't every young man who would care to choose a wife without inquiring into her antecedents. Good night." And the door was closed, leaving Stella with her finger-ends tingling with the desire to bestow upon the young lady's auricular appendages the species of chastisement usually termed a "box."

Somehow, Stella had never thought of that. She had taken it for granted that John Cadburn was acquainted with the principal facts of her history. Besides, if he was not, there had been no necessity, until to-night, for enlightening him on the subject. Nevertheless, she now felt herself placed in a false and disagreeable position, from which she resolved to release herself as quickly as possible.

It was not pleasant to think that, had her lover

known her real position, he might have thought twice before he compromised himself by an offer of marriage, that even now, when he discovered the proposed union to be less unobjectionable than he had supposed, he might, probably would, wish to withdraw from his engagement. No less galling to her pride was the thought that she had rendered herself liable to a suspicion that she had been wanting in candour, and had purposely drawn the young man on with his eyes closed.

"The mistake shall be rectified at once," she murmured, the proud crimson flaming into her cheeks,— "that is, as soon as he gives me an opportunity of setting it right. Of course I cannot write to him, until I have received a letter from him. But it shall be settled promptly then; and if he wishes for his liberty, why, he can have it, and welcome!"

But Stella's good intentions were doomed to be frustrated. Perhaps Mr. Cadburn had obtained the information that she wished to impart from some other source, and deemed utter silence to be the best, if not the most honourable, method of freeing himself from the fetters which he had too hastily forged; for Stella waited in vain for the expected letter. The long, dreamy summer days passed away one after another, and no tidings of John Cadburn reached her.

She missed him terribly at first. She had liked him thoroughly, and in his quiet way John Cadburn had contrived to make himself necessary to her happiness—how necessary she had not known until the dreary blank that his absence occasioned in her life revealed it to her. She found herself watching anxiously for the rat-tat of the postman. Never, she thought, had that official paid such frequent visits to Sylvester Hall as he did in the two or three weeks immediately succeeding Mr. Cadburn's departure; and it was aggravating, too, after every one of those visits, to have to answer Miss Lynne's taunting inquiry, whether she had heard anything of her recreant lover, with a negative.

At first she had tried to find excuses for his continued

silence; but at length her pride took the alarm, and the conviction that she had been trifled with—worse than that, cruelly insulted—forced itself upon her mind, and hot indignation against him took possession of her heart. How dare he treat her so? was her passionate query; what had she done, that he should single her out from other girls for such a deliberate insult? why should he strive by every means in his power to win her affection, and, fancying that he had succeeded, show her how much he valued it and the promise he had extorted from her, by flinging both to the winds?

“He dare not have done it if I had really been what I only seem to be!” she thought, bitterly, entering the music room one evening, in the dusky dimness of the summer twilight.

Miss Lynne was standing by the window, attentively perusing a letter by the failing light. So absorbed was she that she did not hear Stella’s footsteps till she was close beside her. With a confused start, she crumpled up the paper and hastily thrust it into her pocket, but not so quickly that Stella had not ample time to recognise the handwriting.

She turned very pale for an instant; then, recovering herself, she said steadily—

“Pray do not let me interrupt you. You seemed very much interested; may I inquire who is your correspondent?”

“Oh, it’s no matter,” was the confused reply, “I’ve finished reading it. Yes, you can inquire, but I’m not bound to satisfy your curiosity, that I know of.”

“No, certainly not,” Stella answered, coldly. “But I thought—perhaps it was only fancy—that the writing resembled Mr. Cadburn’s.”

Silence for a moment, then Sarah said, defiantly, “Well, if it did, what then?”

“Nothing,”—icily. “Of course I have not—cannot have—any interest in your private correspondence.”

“Haven’t you, though?” muttered Sarah—then aloud, “Most girls would have an interest in their old lover’s letters to another girl, and so have you. You needn’t look so savage over it, Stella! I was friends with John

Cadburn a good while before he knew you ; and there's no earthly reason why he shouldn't write to me, if he likes to do so."

"John Cadburn write to you!"

"Yes; why not?" returned Miss Lynne. "It's very trying, no doubt, and very hurtful to your feelings, that he should think of me first; but don't take it to heart so"—in a patronising, mock-consolatory tone—"perhaps you will get a letter to-morrow."

Stella turned upon her with blazing eyes, and Sarah quailed and shrank back before their scornful fire.

"Why, I really thought you were going to strike me!" she said, with a forced laugh. "Pray don't be so spiteful; I had no idea you had such a temper! Shall I put in any message from you to John when I answer this? I can tell him you think he ought to write to you; shall I?"

Twice Stella made an effort to speak, but the bitter, burning indignation flooding her heart choked back the words she would have uttered, and her voice, when it at last obeyed her will, sounded hoarse, and strained, and unnatural.

"Tell him," she said, "that, if he dares to write to me after this, I will give his letter, unopened, to the flames—tell him that I loathe and scorn him as I would some noxious reptile which had crossed my path, and that never while she lives will Stella Martyn willingly speak to John Cadburn again!" and with head erect, and mien as stately as that of a young empress, Stella sailed majestically out of the room.

But scarcely had she closed the door than a change came over her; her head sank, as if bowed down with a load of shame, and her breath came in heavy, laboured gasps. The atmosphere in the house seemed oppressive—choking; and, like a crushed, guilty thing, she crept out of doors and away, whither she hardly knew, away, through the garden and orchard and fields, till she reached a little fairy nook beside a tiny babbling brook, sheltered by tall trees, and carpeted with soft velvety moss.

Silently, without a cry, without a moan, the girl



flung herself down beside the whispering water. Girl! nay, a girl no longer—a slighted, wronged, insulted woman, with a woman's capacity for suffering, and a woman's power of endurance.

How long she lay there, silently, fiercely fighting against the hard, bitter sense of wrong and injury, with her fiery young blood coursing madly through her veins, she knew not. Hours, or only minutes, might have elapsed when a shocked, startled voice exclaimed—

"Stella! my child, what are you doing here? Are you ill?"

The girl rose wearily to her feet, shaking in every limb, with her face gleaming ghastly white through the dusky shadows.

"I—I am better now," she said, slowly. "Don't mind me, Miss Jesson."

The governess passed one arm round the young girl's waist, and drew her to a rustic seat beneath one of the trees.

"Rest here a little," she said, with the quiet authority which always gained implicit obedience; "it is better than the damp ground, and the evening is getting chilly. My child, you have no wrapper—not even a hat! You ought not to expose yourself in this way."

The girl's head drooped again.

"I didn't know," she said, listlessly; "I—I didn't care."

"But you must care," remonstrated Miss Jesson. "You know, my child, you have no right to trifle with or wilfully injure your health. It is a precious gift for which you will in a great measure be held responsible."

While speaking, Miss Jesson had taken off her apron and wrapped it round Stella's shoulders; then she drew a white handkerchief from her pocket.

"It is quite clean—you need not be alarmed," she said, smiling, throwing it over her companion's head, and knotting the corners under her chin. "There, now you look like—I don't know what you do look like—something very droll and laughter-provoking, though."

Stella half smiled, then sobered again.

"You are very kind, Miss Jesson; much kinder to me than I deserve," she said, almost humbly.

"I think there was some need of kindness; don't you?" said Miss Jesson. "When I see a friend of mine unable to take care of herself, I think it becomes my duty to take care of her, especially when it happens to be a friend whom I particularly value."

Stella opened her eyes in astonishment.

"Oh, Miss Jesson, am I your friend?" she asked, earnestly.

"Yes, I hope so; are you not?"

"Dear Miss Jesson, to be sure I am! I didn't mean so, of course; I meant—I meant that I wish you were my friend!"

"So I am, dear; your true, sincere friend; and if you choose to give me your friendship—real friendship—I cannot tell you how highly I shall value the gift."

Stella turned round to read her companion's face, but she could not see its expression. There was, however, a ring of genuine sincerity in Miss Jesson's voice, and Stella instinctively trusted it. She had long been one of the young teacher's warmest admirers; sometimes rendering her invaluable assistance in the performance of her arduous duties, when, as was frequently the case, her delicate frame sank beneath their weight.

And that Miss Jesson had not been unmindful of the thoughtful, unobtrusive sympathy which manifested itself in a hundred ways was now proved by this unexpected offer of friendship—an offer that was balm and healing to Stella's wounded heart.

"Well, are we to be friends, Stella?" Miss Jesson asked, extending her hand with a smile.

"Oh, yes, please," Stella answered simply, placing her hand in the little white palm stretched out towards her.

And a warm clasp sealed the compact of a friendship which time, instead of weakening, deepened into a bond whose rare sweetness and tenderness lent a new charm to the lives of those two orphan girls till Death laid his icy hand upon the chain, and ruthlessly snapped it.

"Don't you think, dear," Miss Jesson said presently, very gently, "that I might claim one of the privileges of friendship, and ask you what has troubled you so much to-night? Do not tell me, unless you like," she added, noticing that Stella shrank back nervously.

The young girl hesitated. She felt as if she never could put into words the story of the slight she had endured.

"I don't think I could tell even you that," she said, shrinkingly—then, with a sudden change of manner, "Yes, dear Miss Jesson, you have every right to my confidence—I will tell you."

"Not unless you like, dear."

"Oh, yes." And in low shame-stricken tones, with much stammering and hesitation, the story was told.

"That is all?" Miss Jesson asked, as Stella concluded.

"Yes, that is all"—feeling that it sounded very little to make a fuss about—"but, oh! Miss Jesson, I feel so ashamed of myself, that I think I can never look anybody in the face again."

"There is no need for that feeling, my dear. No shame can fall upon you. His only is the shame who could thus cruelly insult a young girl whom he professed to love. You are to blame certainly, but only because you did not more thoroughly ascertain the character of your lover before you accepted him, and that you were ever induced to accept him at all, until you had thoroughly tested the nature of your regard for him."

"Yes, Miss Jesson, I can see it all now," responded Stella. "But I thought I understood his character; I believed him to be upright and honourable; and, Miss Jesson, I liked him very, very much!"

"Perhaps you loved him, my dear? How came you to know the difference between liking 'very very much' and love?"

"I don't know," Stella asserted, blushing scarlet. "But I think there ought to be a difference, and that the regard that I felt for John Cadburn was very

different to the regard that I ought to feel for my betrothed husband."

"You are not the only young girl, my dear, who has made the great mistake of accepting a lover whom she liked very, very much, but whom she did not really love—a mistake which has been followed, in many cases, by life-long repentance, if by no more disastrous consequences. But I am glad to hear you speaking in the past tense of your regard for this young man, for he is quite unworthy that it should continue to exist."

"Yes," responded Stella, looking very sober, "that is just what hurts me so much, Miss Jesson; I don't care so much for his treating me as he has done—though I do care for that too, very much—as I do because he could do it."

"Yes, I see, dear," answered Miss Jesson, with quick sympathy. "Nothing wounds a sensitive nature more keenly than the discovery that a loved and trusted object is unworthy of its love and trust; no requiem is so drearily sad as the mournful plaint of a heart whose idol is shattered. But you must try and bear the pain bravely, dear, and patiently. Our Master never sends us any cross, without giving with it the strength that we need to enable us to bear it, if we only ask it of Him in sincerity of heart; and"—the young governess's voice sank to a lower key, as with clasped hands, and eyes fixed musingly upon the rippling thread of water, gleaming with a faint silvery lustre in the "dim religious light," she quoted the helpful, inspiring words of St. Paul, more as if she were repeating to herself a much-needed lesson than as if she intended them for her companion—"These light afflictions, which are but for a moment, work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

And Stella, looking at her half in wonder, half in awe, felt that, whatever sorrow there was hidden in the depths of those patient eyes, it was one compared to which, in force and intensity, her own was as a meandering rivulet to a mighty rushing river.

Mutely she sank down upon her knees beside her companion, and dropped a timid, reverent kiss upon the little clasped hands. The touch of her lips was light as the fall of a snow-flake, but it roused Alice Jesson from the momentary reverie into which she had fallen.

"Come, dear," she said, with her usual gentle, half-melancholy smile; "the night dew is falling; it is time we went indoors."

"Don't think about this young man any more than you can help," recommended Miss Jesson, as she bade Stella good night.

"I won't think about him at all," returned Stella, resolutely. "Dear Miss Jesson, I feel a great deal better about it already. Good night."

Keen indeed must be the grief which possesses the power of banishing slumber from the eyelids of the young! Unromantic statement, is it not, sentimental reader? but perfectly true, nevertheless. Confess now, how often have you retired to your couch with a heart oppressed with care, expecting to pass the "wee, sma' hours" of the night in anguished wakefulness—to toss restlessly to and fro, wearily and vainly wooing "tired nature's sweet restorer"—you have laid your throbbing head upon the pillow, and, instead of drenching that pillow with tears, you have, if you are young, just turned quietly over and gone snugly to sleep! And so it was with our heroine; in a few minutes she was sleeping as calmly and refreshingly as if John Cadburn had never existed.

And what a blessing it is that it is so! How many a heart-break has been saved by a good night's sleep! how many acts of folly and recklessness has it not prevented! for things wear such a different aspect in the cool, clear morning light to the one they assume in the glare and glitter of gas-light. Truly, the "witching hour of night" has much to answer for! it exerts upon us a strange, mysterious influence. Over-night we glow with passion or thrill with rapture over trifles which the morning light shows up as scarcely worth a thought. Night is the time of impulse, morn-

ing of reflection. At night, imbued with the spirit of the hour, we determine on the pursuit of a glittering ignis-fatuus which would only lure us on to bitter misery; with the dawn of day comes Reason, with the suggestion, "Well, perhaps it is hardly worth while; perhaps, after all, the game isn't worth the candle;" and the object which last night seemed to us the one grand prize of life dwindles into an insignificant bauble.

Ah! it is well for us sometimes that our "night and morning tales do not agree." Impulsive reader, when at any time, if that time be after daylight has forsaken the scene, you feel irresistibly impelled towards any course of conduct, yield not to the temptation, pause and—sleep upon it.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### A SAD, SAD STORY.

HARDER than ever Stella worked during the weeks that lay between her discovery of her lover's perfidious conduct and the summer vacation. Next day she had looked her trouble bravely in the face, to find that, though her heart was still sore, matters were not half so bad as they had seemed the preceding evening, and she determined henceforth to waste not one thought upon John Cadburn, and as little as possible upon the pain his conduct had occasioned her. Whenever a thought of him came into her head, she systematically set to work to drive it out by thinking of some other subject, and if, as was sometimes the case, that proceeding was ineffectual, and Mr. Cadburn's image pertinaciously intruded its unwelcome presence, she resorted to half an hour's hard study, which invariably laid the ghost of departed days, and its reappearances became less and less frequent, till, in an incredibly short time, they ceased altogether.

We have a pet theory respecting the so-called "love" so prevalent in this world of ours. We believe the prescription given above to be an infallible cure for all such affections of the hear—ahem! of the imagination. Only try it, ye love-sick damsels, pining under the neglect of a recreant lover!

Meanwhile, the intimacy between Sarah Lynne and Stella, though not entirely broken off, had gradually lessened. Stella never sought her quondam friend's society, but she was too proud to show, by any sudden and marked alteration in her manner, when she could not avoid contact with her, how much she had felt the treatment to which she had been subjected. She knew instinctively that Sarah was watching for symptoms of suffering, and, had they been perceptible, would have exulted in the consciousness that she had planted the arrow that was quivering in the heart of her victim. But no such triumph fell to Miss Lynne's share.

And Stella had little time to spare for Miss Lynne. Besides her own legitimate occupation, she was unremitting in her efforts to lighten her friend Miss Jesson's duties, which duties were fast developing into wearisome labours. Willingly, gladly, Stella would have taken them all upon herself, but that, of course, could not be; neither Madame Oliphant nor Miss Jesson would have been satisfied with such a state of affairs.

It was the last day of term, and, as usual, the occasion was distinguished by a "breaking-up" party, which, as the initiated in such matters already know, means that both "day-scholars" and "boarders" met, at a specified hour, in the schoolroom at Sylvester Hall, and were regaled with weak tea, bread-and-butter, and plain—very plain—cake.

It had been a harassing day for the English governess—who was expected to look after Margaret, cut up cake and bread-and-butter, pour out tea, and "see after things" generally—and consequently for her active and helpful coadjutor, Stella.

But tea was over at last, and the young people turned out *en masse* into the orchard. Stella busied

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herself for some time in organizing various games for the benefit of the younger scholars, and then, finding herself at liberty, wended her way to her favourite seat beside the streamlet, hoping to find Miss Jesson already there, that they might have a quiet, restful "talk."

She was not disappointed. The young governess was reclining wearily upon the rustic seat, in an attitude that bespoke either mental or bodily depression, when Stella reached it.

"How tired you are!" exclaimed Stella, regretfully, throwing herself down upon the mossy carpet at her friend's feet. "I ought not to have let you do so much."

"Dear child"—Alice Jesson looked at the solicitous face with an affectionate smile—"how could you help it? Say, rather, you have been doing too much for me, as it is."

"I could not do that," responded Stella, softly.

"I cannot bear to take advantage of your unselfish generosity," Miss Jesson said, with a touch of pain in her tired young voice; "I cannot bear to see you tiring yourself doing my work; and yet, what can I do?"

"Please don't, Miss Jesson; you know I like to do it," observed Stella, earnestly. "Unselfish, indeed!" she went on, merrily. "Don't I know that, if I help you, you will get through earlier, and so have more time to give me? You call that unselfish, do you? Well, I call it sheer selfishness, and nothing better. Don't try to make me vain by praising me up for a virtue that I don't possess, please. Besides, if I choose to relieve you of a task, it isn't your work at all that I do; it becomes my work, doesn't it?"

"Very one-sided logic!" dissented Miss Jesson, shaking her head.

"I don't believe in two-sided logic," said Stella, laughing. "How glad you will be when the girls are all gone home, won't you? You will be able to rest a little then. I shall be glad, for your sake, when tomorrow is over."



"Not for your own?" Miss Jesson said, a little anxiously.

"Well, yes," answered Stella, deliberately; "on the whole, I shall be glad, I think. But, you know, Miss Jesson, it always seems rather dull in the holidays."

"Sarah Lynne will not leave till next week, I understand."

"Oh, dear! won't she?" rejoined Stella, with a sigh of dismay. "Why not?"

"Her parents are on a continental tour, you know, and the house is closed. But they will reach home on Tuesday, and she is to remain with us until Wednesday."

"Ah, well! we must try and bear the infliction, I suppose," said Stella, resignedly. "Miss Jesson, how I wish you and I could fly away somewhere to the sea-side for the next month! I do so long to see the sea, grand old Father Ocean! Have you ever seen it, Miss Jesson?"

"Yes, often."

Stella, glancing up in surprise at the tone in which those two little words were uttered, saw a face so changed, so stricken with anguish, that her heart leaped with terror; just such a face as she had gazed upon once before, when she had been the bearer of that black-edged letter.

"Miss Jesson, dear Miss Jesson, what is it?" she cried wildly.

The white frozen lips unbent a little from their rigid lines, and tried to smile—such a wan, pitiful smile.

"Have I frightened you, dear?" Miss Jesson murmured feebly. "It is nothing," she added, with slow, shuddering horror, "only I could not bear the sight of the sea. I can hardly bear the sound of it, you see, dear; but I think—I think the sight of it would kill me. All the pain, all the sorrow of my life came to me from the treacherous sea," she went on, more calmly, "and I cannot think of it without a pang. Will it tire you, dear, if I tell you how the terrible sea robbed me of all that made life precious to me?"

"Tire me? no, indeed!" returned Stella, quickly. "But you, dear Miss Jesson! you are not equal to it, I am afraid."

"I loved the sea once," said Miss Jesson, musingly, "when I was a child, I dearly loved it. We had a beautiful home on the south coast, not a grand home, for we were not very rich, but a pretty cottage, with a neat lawn sloping down almost to the water's edge at high tide. Ah! how happy I was in those days! dancing with bare feet over the shining yellow sands, or perched in some craggy nook, looking away with longing eyes over the wide, wide waste of waters, longing to skim like a sea-gull over those glinting waves, and see what lay beyond them—the strange fairy countries of which I had read in books.

"My parents, though little dreaming how sorely I should one day need it, gave me the best education within their power. And so, among my books, and flowers, and music, I grew up, dreaming my life away, till I was nearly nineteen. Then Willie Macpherson came home on a short visit—he was the Vicar's son, but he had chosen the sea as a profession—and somehow, after he came, my life seemed brighter, and sweeter, and fuller; and when, one evening, as we were standing on the sea-shore, watching the round moon rising slowly from the waters, Willie told me that he loved me, and asked me to be his wife, what a happy girl I was!" the sweet young voice faltered pitifully. Stella could only look her sympathy; and Miss Jesson continued, after a moment's pause, "Ah me! the brief, bright dream! From that day I lived in an enchanted world, until the time came for Willie to return to his ship. How hard it was to let him go! though we both thought the parting would be only for a little while—just one voyage to the West Indies, and then he would return to claim me as his bride. He had entreated my parents to consent to an immediate union, but they would not entertain the idea for an instant. So we parted, Willie and I, never more to meet on earth. Oh, Willie, Willie!" and with a low, plaintive wail, the bright girlish head was bowed in an agony of sorrow.

Presently it was raised again, with the old gentle patience in the tear-dimmed azure orbs.

"Let me finish," she said, sadly. "Only two days after Willie went away, my parents, my noble white-haired father, my gentle, loving mother, went out to enjoy a sail, in the still calm of a summer evening. I, standing upon the shore and looking after them, waving my handkerchief, with gay smiles upon my lips, saw the boat suddenly swerve and capsize; saw them—oh! can I ever forget it?—struggling with the cruel waves, and I—I, who would have given my life for theirs, was utterly powerless to save! I could do nothing, nothing but scream for assistance. A gentleman, a stranger to me at that time, heard my frantic cries, and plunged instantly into the water. He succeeded in bringing both to shore; but, alas! it was too late; and I, who an hour ago was blessed as never girl was blessed, was an orphan, with nothing left me but the cold, dead forms of the two whose loving care had shielded me from every ill through nineteen happy years!

"How I lived through the anguish of that time I do not know. The Vicar and his wife were very kind, and did what they could to comfort me under the heavy blow; and when the dear dead faces of my loved lost parents were hidden from my sight in the cold churchyard, they took me home with them for a little, until arrangements could be made for my future.

"Nobody had any idea that, when everything was settled, there would not be a comfortable provision for me. But, on investigating my father's affairs, it was discovered that, some time previously, he had—dear unworldly old man!—incautiously become security for an old friend, to a heavy amount. A few days after his death the bill became due; it was presented for payment to the person whom my father had befriended—and dishonoured. The holder at once put in a claim upon my father's estate, and, his demand satisfied, there were only a few, a very few, pounds left for me. I am thankful, I am very thankful, that my parents never knew how destitute they would leave their child.

The Vicar generously offered me a home until Willie returned ; but I could not be dependent, even upon Willie's parents, and I insisted upon doing something for my own maintenance.

"Through the influence of the gentleman who had so bravely striven to save my parents, and whom I now know as Mr. Marmaduke Langley, I procured my present situation, which I had not long filled when the last crushing blow fell upon my quivering heart—the news that the *Kamtschatka* was lost, with all on board. Can you wonder, dear, that the very thought of the cruel, cruel sea thrills me with horror?"

"I think," Stella said, in a low, intense tone, while her eyes glittered with the tears brought into them by the sad story, so simply, yet so pathetically told, "I think I must have crept away somewhere and died!"

"Died!" murmured Alice Jesson. "Ah! how gladly would I have died! But I could not. Death comes not at the bidding of a broken heart; and I dared not lay violent hands upon the life that God had given me. Once, in one wild, wicked moment, I prayed frantically that He would recall that gift; but I was soon enabled to see the madness and folly of such a petition, and to ask instead for patience to bear my trials meekly and uncomplainingly, and that my life, though apparently robbed of all its brightness, might be made a blessing to others. And I am willing to live now until my work in the world is done; but sometimes it is weary, weary work, and I shall be very glad to lie down and rest!"

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## CHAPTER XV.

"OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE, ON WITH THE NEW."

SUNDAY in Cleighton.

What a peaceful, indescribable calm pervades the atmosphere of the little country-town on the Sabbath

day! No sound save the mellow chiming of the church bells—bells of which Cleighton is extremely proud—breaks in upon the intense, profound quiet. It wants just ten minutes to six—the hour at which Divine service commences in all the places of worship in Cleighton. A few minutes later, and the sleeping streets will be alive with people hastening to the place which they most particularly affect, but at present most of them are indoors, busily engaged in putting the finishing touches to elaborate Sabbath toilettes.

Three figures are leisurely pursuing their way along the Belmont Road, in the direction of the noble edifice recently erected by the Cleightonian Wesleyans. The figures are those of Miss Jesson, Stella Martyn, and Sarah Lynne, who, as usual, intend to be in their seats before the minister makes his appearance from the vestry.

“What a lovely evening!” exclaims Stella; “and how gently the leaves rustle on these old trees! It always seems as if everything in Cleighton, even the inanimate bricks and mortar, were conscious of the fact that Sunday is essentially a ‘day of rest.’”

Nobody answers. It is doubtful if Miss Lynne has heard the remark; for she is gazing intently at a tall, black, masculine figure, some distance down the road, which is rapidly advancing towards them. Stella glances smilingly at Miss Jesson, and meets the young governess’s eyes fixed upon her face with an anxious, questioning look.

“What is——” begins Stella, in surprise; then, as her eyes follow the direction of Sarah Lynne’s, the words die on her lips, and a vivid scarlet flush dyes her transparent cheeks; for she has recognised the approaching form as that of John Cadburn. For a moment the trees and houses seem to clasp hands and skip round in a circle before her astonished eyes; then the whirl of emotion passes away, and leaves her, except for the slightly quickened pulsation of her heart, perfectly calm and collected. The lesson of indifference which she has been so strenuously en-

deavouring to teach herself is well learned, and it stands her in good stead in the present unlooked-for emergency.

How she wishes, though, that they were safely seated in the chapel! But that edifice is nearly midway between them, and it is more than probable that the young man will be the first to reach it.

So he is; and he stands just inside the door, waiting for them to come up.

Stella flashes a reassuring smile into the anxious eyes bent upon her face, and then her features assume an expression of passionless calm. Not a particle of colour stains the marble purity of her cheek as she passes her quondam lover, who steps hastily, impetuously forward, with half-extended hand, only to draw back again with an air of confusion, as the magnificent grey eyes look into his own eager orbs with the cold, indifferent glance that one gives to an utter stranger; and Stella, cool, self-possessed and dignified, sweeps past him through the inner doorway and up the long aisle, to her accustomed seat.

"False! heartless!" he mutters in a fierce, passionate undertone, his eyes following the light, graceful figure till the green-baize-covered door slowly swings to and hides it from his sight; then he turns to shake hands with Miss Lynne, who has been waiting to claim his attention, and now greets him effusively, with a pleased smile and warm words of welcome, which fall upon almost unheeding ears.

And Stella, after a first little flutter of agitation consequent upon the meeting, puts him out of her head entirely, and gives her whole attention to the sermon. It is Mr. Percy who is officiating to-night, and he is very earnest, very impressive, and preaches with even more than his usual fire and energy.

The eloquent impassioned words waken a strange new chord in Stella's heart, and, the service over, she returns, silent and thoughtful, and with an unwonted shadow upon her brow, to Sylvester Hall.

After supper she slowly ascends the stairs, and enters a long, low apartment, generally used as a

"lumber-room," with a small window overlooking the garden and a narrow green lane, bordered on each side with a high box hedge, into which it opened.

The room seems oppressively close, so she throws open the casement to let in the refreshing evening air. She is standing there, inhaling with a dreamy sense of enjoyment the delicious perfume-laden breeze, when Miss Lynne enters the room, equipped for walking.

"It's such a lovely night," she begins; "I want to persuade you to come a little way for a walk. Make haste and get ready."

"Thank you, I am not going out to night," Stella answers, without turning her head.

"Not going? Oh, nonsense! Come along." Then, as Stella makes no movement to get ready, she adds, in a tone of vexation, "Do you really mean it?"

"Really—and I wouldn't go either, Sarah, if I were you."

"Why not? Indeed I shall. But I hate walking about alone. Do come, there's a dear,"—coaxingly.

But Stella is unmoved. Perhaps the consciousness that Sarah does not really care for her society, and only tries to persuade her because she "hates walking about alone," makes the temptation less strong than it would otherwise have been, and helps her to withstand Miss Lynne's entreaties.

"I cannot go to-night," she repeats, firmly.

"Why not? You must have some reason. I suppose you do not want my company!" Sarah says, angrily.

Stella does not repel the accusation, but she says, quietly, "I don't think it is so well to walk about after service on a Sunday evening. One is sure to get talking and laughing with people, and if the effect of the sermon is not neutralised, it certainly is not deepened. Of course I don't mean to object to a quiet stroll, but only to walking up and down the crowded street, as we have always done whenever we have gone out on a Sunday evening."

Which was perfectly true; for Stella had always found it impossible to induce Miss Lynne to forego the

attractions of the thronged public promenade, in favour of a walk in a more secluded direction.

"Oh, that's it!" Miss Lynne exclaims, with a sneer. "You've turned saint, have you? The fit has come on very suddenly; you were never troubled with such scruples when John Cadburn was here!"

Stella allows the inuendo to pass unnoticed.

"He is here to-night," she observes, coolly, turning round with a sudden impulse, and fixing her eyes full upon Sarah's face.

"Here! Oh, yes; I forgot that. Well, I wouldn't stay in for that, if I were you; but if you won't go, you won't;" and with a pettish gesture Miss Lynne turns away and quits the room. A moment later Stella sees her walking rapidly along the box alley, and watches her idly for a few seconds, then goes towards Miss Jesson's room.

"Come in," says a low, sweet voice, in answer to her gentle knock; and as she enters the room, Miss Jesson looks up at her, from her seat at the open window, with a welcoming smile.

"May I come and talk to you a little while?" Stella asks, with a slight dash of timidity in her voice.

"Yes, of course, dear."

Stella carries a low ottoman to the window, seats herself in her favourite position at Miss Jesson's feet, and for some time gazes silently and thoughtfully at the glowing west.

"Well, dear?" the young governess says, inquiringly, after a while.

Stella raises her eyes half-timidly to her friend's face, then lowers them again, as she tells of the impression the sermon has made upon her, and how dissatisfied she feels with herself and her own empty, ill-spent life. And Miss Jesson looks down upon the troubled young face, and listens kindly and tenderly, and by her wise, judicious counsel and helpful sympathy encourages the aspirations of the young heart after its ideal of purity and goodness, and teaches her that the vague restless longing of an immortal soul can never be met with anything less than the pure,



satisfying streams that flow from the one great fountain, opened for sinners "from the foundation of the world."

And then the low, murmuring voices die away into silence, and the glowing tints of the western sky gradually pale into dull, sombre grey. As the last crimson streak fades out of the horizon, a chill, moaning breeze springs up, and the girls shiver in their thin summer dresses.

Miss Jesson rises to close the window.

"I must not keep you here any longer, dear," she says. "It is time you went to bed. Madame would not approve of my encouraging you to keep late hours."

"Late, indeed!" Stella begins—then checks the laughing remonstrance that rises to her lips, as she notes the weary languor apparent in every line of the listless, drooping figure before her—notes, too, with a quick, sharp pang, how transparently white and thin the little hands look in contrast with the black dress; how the delicate contour of the face has sharpened during the last few weeks, and how painfully fair that face has grown—snowy white it is, except for the two flushing spots of scarlet in the cheeks, and Stella's heart almost stands still with a new, sudden fear, as she gazes.

Miss Jesson looks up with a half-smile, as she feels the power of the intent, earnest eyes.

"What is the matter, dear?" she says, quietly.

"Don't you feel as well as usual to-night?" Stella asks, with quivering lips.

"Yes, dear; quite as well as usual—only rather tired. What makes you ask?"

"Nothing, only—you look like an angel!" Stella says, reverently.

"Good night, dear," says Miss Jesson, gently, bending over Stella, and softly kissing her anxious brow. And the young girl feels in that kiss the full force of an unspoken benediction. It seems to her as if that gentle caress were a talisman to shield her from evil.

Going along the passage leading to her own room,

Stella remembers that she has left the window of the "lumber-room" open, and she returns in order to close it.

Pausing a moment, with her hand on the sash, looking out over the darkening landscape, her eye rests upon two figures, apparently engaged in earnest conversation, standing between the hedge-rows bordering the lane. One she instantly recognises; the other—do her eyes deceive her, or is it indeed John Cadburn?

Not wishing to attract their attention, she closes the window very gently, and turns away, but not before she has seen the young man, after one swift, questioning glance at the "lumber-room" window, bend down and impress a kiss upon Sarah Lynne's apparently not unwilling lips.

Stella has scarcely time to reach her own room, and throw a dressing-gown over her shoulders, before there comes a low knock at her door, which she has locked. Fresh as she is from the purity and peacefulness of Miss Jesson's society, Stella could very well dispense with Sarah Lynne's company, and feels very much inclined not to answer the knock; but, on second thoughts, she rises and admits her.

There is a suppressed excitement—an ill-concealed exultation in her manner, that Stella's eyes are quick enough to detect, though she would be at a loss to understand it, if the scene in the lane had not given her a clue.

Miss Lynne seats herself upon the edge of the bedstead, while Stella sits down before the glass, and begins to unfasten her hair.

"I'm sorry you wouldn't go out to-night," Sarah commences, after a pause, during which she has been attentively watching Stella taking out the hairpins from her lustrous mass of hair.

"I am not," Stella answers, jerking out the last hairpin, and tumbling her hair down over her shoulders. "Why are you?"

"I met John Cadburn, and you would have had a chance of making it up, perhaps. He inquired very kindly after you,"—her tone giving Stella the impres-

sion that he had just made an indifferent inquiry about her health.

"Indeed—I am very much obliged to him; I suppose he was making inquiries about me when I saw you in the lane just now?"—looking keenly at Miss Lynne's shadowy reflection in the glass.

The room is almost dark now, but Sarah is sitting just in the line of light that comes from the window, and Stella sees her start slightly; then a half-triumphant expression flits over her face—she has evidently resolved on braving it out.

"I'm glad you saw us," she says at length. "I wanted to tell you, Stella, but I was afraid——"

"Of what?"—indifferently.

"That you would think I had done it on purpose. But, you know, Stella, I tried to persuade you to go too."

"I don't suppose you made John Cadburn an offer of marriage—and really I don't see how you could have 'done it' in any other way," observes Stella, with quiet scorn.

"No, indeed! So far from that, I was a long time before I would listen to him at all. But he begged so hard, poor fellow—he actually went down on his knees to me in the dusty road—fancy it!—I couldn't refuse him. And, Stella, he says he loved me best all along—only you fascinated him for a little while."

"I am glad he has recovered his senses," Stella remarks, quietly. "It is a pity he didn't make that discovery some time ago. However, 'better late than never,' you know. I congratulate you on your conquest—you cannot but be happy with a lover who is such a pattern of constancy."

Miss Lynne's white teeth bite viciously at her under lip; but she is equal to the occasion.

"Oh, he'll be constant enough to a girl that he really cares for," she asserts, confidently.

"Ah! well, perhaps he may," admits Stella, stifling a yawn. "Will you forgive me, Sarah, if I am so deficient in politeness as to inform you that I am very sleepy?"

At which hint Miss Lynne retires, satisfied with

having flaunted her triumph in the face of her rival, but not quite certain whether said "rival" feels the fact that she has been "cut out" as acutely as Miss Lynne could wish.

It is a pity that young lady cannot hear Stella's low, merry laugh, as the door closes upon her. She would know then how entirely her mean, petty spite has lost its sting.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### AT THE FLOWER-SHOW.

SOMEHOW, Miss Lynne did not look quite so happy at breakfast, next morning, as a newly betrothed maiden should look—a fact that might, perhaps, be accounted for by the "crackers" and crimping-pins sticking out in all directions from her cranium, "like quills upon the fretful porcupine;" for "crackers" and crimping-pins are by no means conducive to a comfortable night's rest; neither are they particularly remarkable for improving a young lady's personal appearance, should she so far forget the "whole duty" of woman—that of looking pretty—as to appear with such extraordinary appendages at the breakfast table.

Be that as it may, Miss Lynne was decidedly ill-tempered. She drank her coffee in moody silence, and devoured thick "planks" of bread-and-butter with a sort of savage relish, as if each unoffending slice had done her a mortal injury, which nothing but the utter extermination of the whole pile could ever wipe out.

Towards the close of the meal, however—having apparently revenged herself upon a sufficient number—she waxed more gracious, and condescended to inform the company that "Mr. Cadburn was coming at eleven o'clock, to drive her to the flower-show at Weyburn Park;" having made which important an-

nouncement, the young lady ran upstairs to make herself as charming as possible for the occasion.

Precisely as the old town-clock banged out the last stroke of eleven, a fine, high-stepping nag, which seemed to disdain alike the ground and the smart little "trap" that it was compelled to draw, was reined up at the front door of Sylvester Hall, and John Cadburn, descending therefrom, handed in Miss Lynne, dressed in her "Sunday best," with her hair crimped and curled to perfection, his eyes the while wandering restlessly over the front of the building, as if he expected to discover a face peeping out at one of the windows.

So he did—the face of Martha, the housemaid, begrimed with dirt, and adorned with several splashes of black-lead—which, perhaps, was not precisely the face that the young man was looking for.

"How hot it is!" Stella remarked, entering Miss Jesson's room, half an hour later. "I think I'll go down to the brook. Will you come, Miss Jesson?"

"No, thank you, dear; I am going to lie down a little while—this sultry weather makes my head ache terribly."

"It is trying for you, isn't it?" responded Stella, sympathetically, throwing open the window to its utmost extent, and letting down the blind, to exclude the glaring sunlight. "There, that feels cooler, doesn't it? Now go to sleep, if you please."

And taking up a copy of Longfellow, Stella sauntered idly out of the house, and through the pleasant, shady orchard to her dainty little nest beneath the trees, where, throwing herself down upon the soft green moss, she opens her book, at the words—

*"Pleasant it was, when woods were green,  
And winds were soft and low,  
To lie amid some sylvan scene,  
Where, the long, drooping boughs between,  
Shadows dark and sunlit sheen  
Alternate come and go."*

"Pleasant indeed!" she murmurs, with a little sigh

of dreamy content, while the lazy zephyrs waft towards her the fragrant odour of woodbine and eglantine, and the rustling leaves whisper mysteriously together overhead, and the drowsy hum of the bees, laden with spoils from the adjacent clover fields, mingles with the tinkling music of the brook in

*"A slumb'rous sound, a sound that brings  
The feelings of a dream ;"*

and which presently brings not only "the feelings of a dream," but a dream itself; and, with her head cushioned upon her arm, Stella goes off to sleep, and sleeps so profoundly that the gay voices and laughter of a small party of ladies and gentlemen, who are coming leisurely across the meadow towards her, on their way to Sylvester Hall, fail to disturb her.

"'Sleeping Beauty,' I declare!" airily cries one lady, suddenly observing the recumbent figure. "What gentleman feels disposed to win a pair of gloves?"

"Nobody wants an extra pair such a day as this, I should imagine," laughs the gentleman who is more particularly addressed. "But, setting gloves aside, the young lady is pretty enough to be an excuse for any amount of folly. Don't you think so, Sir Marmaduke?"

"I beg your pardon—of whom are you speaking, my lord?" asks the young man, who has evidently not been listening to the conversation.

"The young lady lying there under the trees. I was remarking that she is very pretty—such an uncommon face!"

The gentleman whose attention is thus directed to the sleeper glances somewhat carelessly in the direction indicated. The glance is followed by a slight start and an undertoned colloquy with a benevolent-looking elderly lady beside him; and then the others fall back, and the young man goes forward alone.

A little shower of water-drops upon her face brings Stella back from the land of dreams, and she wakes up, startled and confused, to find a dark laughing face

bending over her. Bewildered, she springs to her feet, and gazes at it for a moment, almost doubting whether she is not still dreaming, then the half-frightened look in her eyes vanishes, and a glad light breaks over her face, as she recognises Marmaduke Langley—bronzed, bearded, altered, but still Duke—with the old kindly eyes and smile, though both are graver and sadder than of yore.

"Don't you mean to speak to me?" Duke asks at length, with a smile, and a sudden, swift realisation of the fact that his *protégée* is no longer a child.

"I don't know," stammers Stella; "yes, I am very glad to see you Mr.—Sir Marmaduke; but you startled me terribly."

And Stella crimsons to the temples as she remembers how nicely she has been "caught."

"Too bad of me, wasn't it?" confesses Duke, lightly. "But I couldn't resist the temptation. Ah, here comes my mother—she must make my peace with her ward."

Then, after a warm greeting between Mrs. Langley and herself, Stella—inwardly congratulating herself that, it being Monday, her light print morning-dress is irreproachably clean and neat—is led forward, and, still in a kind of maze, hears the words of introduction that fall from Duke's lips—

"My ward, Miss Stella Martyn, Lady Thornton—Lord Aylesmere—Sir Henry Glenmergen—Sybil, you remember Miss Martyn, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I remember," languidly assents Sybil Langley, now a tall, handsome, dashing brunette, with the gracefully indolent manner of a fashionable belle, condescendingly extending the tips of her delicately gloved fingers. Then evidently satisfied that she has done all that could reasonably be expected of her, either by her brother or the young person whom he has had the bad taste to befriend, Sybil turns again to the Earl of Aylesmere, apparently forgetful of Stella's existence.

But the earl is less unmindful of the claims of courtesy. It would be simply impossible for Lord

Aylesmere to behave discourteously to any woman, be she never so old and ugly. He has a reverential, chivalrous regard for, and implicit faith in the angelic attributes of, the whole sex. To him the term "woman" is a synonym for all that is good, and gentle, and pure in human nature. To say that Lord Aylesmere was never heard to speak slightly or disrespectfully of woman is to give but a faint idea of the tender, affectionate esteem in which he holds her.

He acknowledges the introduction with a bow as deferential as if Stella were a princess of the blood-royal, and expresses a hope that she will honour him so far as to accompany himself and her friends to Weyburn Park this afternoon. At which piece of condescension Miss Langley's aristocratic features light up with a scornful gleam, while Stella, in a few well-chosen words, modestly thanks his lordship for his kindness, and regrets that she cannot accept the invitation. For, though she does not assign this as a reason, it is just possible that her friends might not be best pleased by her accompanying them, and she will not force her society upon them unsought.

But that doubt is speedily dispelled. Sir Marmaduke and his mother instantly turn and warmly second the earl's invitation, and his lordship says, laughingly—

"Don't suppose you can get off so quietly, Miss Martyn; I shall accept no negative, unless it is backed by a sound, unanswerable argument; and you do not look like a young lady given to argument."

And so, as Stella does not like to give publicity to the only argument against the plan which she has left,—namely, her own conviction that the civility is offered to Sir Marmaduke Langley's ward, and not to herself,—she has no alternative but to smilingly retract her refusal, and make up her mind to a very pleasant day.

"That is settled then," says Mrs. Langley. "Can you be ready in half an hour, my dear?"

"Oh, yes," Stella responds, unhesitatingly.



"Don't hurry her too much, Mrs. Langley," observes the earl, considerably. "Say three-quarters—it is August, you know—I'm sure we can while away that time very comfortably in this pretty little town; and we shall reach Weyburn just in time for luncheon."

"Very well, my lord. We will call for you in three-quarters of an hour, my dear."

"Thank you." And Stella, in a flutter of pleasurable excitement, wends her way back to Sylvester Hall, and goes to Miss Jesson's room to consult her, if she is awake, upon the all-important subject what she shall wear; for she has suddenly remembered, to her dismay, that she has no dress fit for such an occasion, the only suitable one that she possesses—a light muslin—being this day, of all days, "in the wash."

"What am I to do?" she says, presenting herself before Miss Jesson with a rueful face. "I wish I hadn't promised to go. I don't half like going out to enjoy myself, and leaving you here alone; but they were so kind, I couldn't refuse."

"Don't let any thought of me mar your enjoyment," Miss Jesson says, contentedly. "Sylvester Hall will be far more pleasant to me this sultry day than the noise and glare and heat of a flower-show. But about your dress"—and she lies still a moment, looking at Stella contemplatively.

"There isn't much difference in our height, or figure," she says, musingly. Then getting up, and unlocking a drawer, she turns over the contents, and finally, with quivering lips, draws forth a delicate white embroidered muslin, with frills of soft filmy lace at the throat and wrists, and a *fichu* to match, trimmed with the same cobwebby lace, and holds them up before Stella's wondering eyes.

"It is the dress I wore the day that—that Willie went away," she says, softly. "I have never worn it since. Come here, my dear."

"No, dear Miss Jesson, I cannot!" cries Stella, drawing back in agitation.

"Yes, yes! Let me help you dress, my dear." And the gentle hands, lingering lovingly over their dainty

task, array Stella's graceful young form in the spotless robe; and she, touched to the heart by this proof of affection, has no words with which to express her gratitude, and silently submits to the delicate manipulation of the dexterous little fingers.

"I cannot thank you, Miss Jesson—I don't know how," she murmurs at length, as Miss Jesson, having given the finishing touches to her dress, steps back a few paces to note the effect.

"There is no need of thanks, my dear; the sight of you amply repays me for any pain it may have cost me to disentomb that dress. I don't think I dare let you have a look in the mirror before you go. Wait a moment—I haven't quite done with you;" and producing a tiny casket, Miss Jesson takes therefrom a pair of ear-drops and a small brooch, set with pearls and turquoises, and clasps them in the small shell-like ears and among the foamy waves of lace at the round white throat.

"There! Now for your hat and gloves—and the *grande toilette* of Miss Stella Martyn is perfected. But Miss Martyn must not forget to take a shawl with her, or she will probably regret that she ever allowed Alice Jesson to officiate as lady's maid."

"I feel like a sparrow that has stolen the plumage of a humming-bird," says Stella, walking to the mirror, and taking a good look at the young lady therein reflected, while a flush of surprised delight mantles cheek and brow; adding, with childlike pleasure, "I didn't think I could look so nice!"

"Dress doth make a difference," quotes Miss Jesson, smiling at her. "I am not afraid that there will be a nicer-looking young lady at Weyburn to-day than Miss Stella Martyn."

"I only wish you could go too," says Stella, regretfully.

"Don't I tell you that I would rather see you than all the flower-shows in the world? Hark! isn't that the carriage?"

"She isn't ready, of course. She will keep us waiting half an hour probably—and she'll look like a

gawky country-girl when she does come, I expect; I, for one, shall be ashamed of her," Sybil Langley is saying, as the door opens and Stella appears.

Sir Marmaduke looks at her with a critical eye as he hands her into the carriage, for his sister's remarks have not failed to produce their intended impression; but the half-uneasy expression of his face changes to one of relief, as he observes the quiet elegance of her dress. He knows nothing of dress in detail, but he sees that his *protégée* looks like a lady, and he is satisfied, and his eye seeks his sister's with a little flash of triumph.

That young lady's eyebrows are elevated in languid astonishment; but as Duke stoops to arrange Stella's dress she takes the opportunity of saying, in an undertone—which, however, she is not particularly careful shall not reach other ears than his, as the heightened colour of Stella's cheek proves—"All very fine! but the cloven foot will peep out by-and-by—take my word for it."

But the cloven foot, if indeed there be one to hide, is snugly stowed away under the folds of white drapery, and no word or look, throughout the day, betrays its existence. It is true that at first Stella is quiet and shy, though not awkwardly so, and the hot blood displays an uncomfortable propensity for rushing into her cheeks upon very slight provocation; but, if she does not shine with especial brilliance, she is at least guiltless of any breach, however trifling, of the rules of good-breeding, and passes the ordeal of the luncheon-table without a single mistake. She feels that brother and sister are both watching her keenly, the one dreading, the other hoping for some signs of vulgarity—some evidence of her low origin; and she resolves to show them that innate refinement and delicacy do not depend on the "mere accident of birth," and are not the sole property of the softly nurtured aristocrat—that it is just as possible for the daughter of a laundress to be a lady, as for the daughter of a duchess.

After luncheon, the party, winding their way among

the gaily dressed groups upon the lawn, proceed to the marquee in which the flower-show was held, where Lord Aylesmere is to award the prizes to the successful competitors. A ringing cheer greets them on their first appearance, for his lordship is very popular among his tenants, and many heads are turned to catch sight of "the grandees."

Among them Stella sees, with intense amusement, John Cadburn and Sarah Lynne—the latter looking very hot and fagged from the perseverance with which she has been playing at "kiss-in-the-ring" in the broiling sun—sees, too, the expression of blank amazement that sweeps over the young lady's face, as she recognises *one* of the party to which John Cadburn is calling her attention.

"That is Lady Thornton—the one in grey silk," Stella hears him say as, with her head held proudly erect, she passes close to him, so close that her white dress brushes his feet; "and the young man beside her is Sir Henry Glenmergen—he's very sweet upon her daughter, they say; the three in mourning are the Langleys of Helstone; I don't know the tall grey-haired gentleman, nor——"

"Oh, that's Lord Aylesmere, to be sure—Weyburn belongs to him, you know. That girl in white looks like—good gracious! it's Stella Martyn! How on earth came she there?"

"Yes, it's Stella—there's no mistake about that," John Cadburn says, with a long glance of admiration at the slender white-robed figure; "and she looks in her right place, somehow—she looks quite as much a lady as any of them."

"Fine feathers make fine birds!" snaps Miss Lynne. The sight of Stella thus exalted above herself has taken away all her pleasure, for this day at least. "Are you coming to see them give away the prizes?"

But if pleasure has forsaken her, it is kinder to Stella. She has never seen a flower-show before, and the scene seems to her like a vision of fairyland. The white tents, with their fluttering pennons, dotting the velvety sward—the bright, gorgeous, many-tinted

flowers, shedding their perfumed breath upon the summer air—the brilliant dresses—the rich, sweet music of the band, and above it all the clear blue sky—almost Italian in its deep, intense azure—form a never-to-be-forgotten enjoyment.

Pleased with her pleasure, which is written legibly enough upon her face, Duke and his mother vie with each other in their efforts to enhance it, and carry her from one object of interest to another, while Duke delights her ears with eloquent descriptions of the flora of other countries, and draws comparisons between them and that of her own land.

Presently Duke catches the eye of an old acquaintance, and gracefully excusing himself for a few minutes, goes across the lawn to join him; Mrs. Langley is talking to one of the exhibitors about a superb plant that she wishes to purchase, and so Stella finds herself *tête-à-tête* with Lady Thornton, who has been regarding her for some time with an anxious, slightly puzzled look in her mournful brown eyes.

At first Stella feels a little shy at this titled lady. But Lady Thornton begins to talk to the young girl with quiet, high-bred ease, and soon Stella forgets her shyness in her interest in the subject started, and responds with a grace and intelligence that charm her new acquaintance. They are mutually pleased with each other when Mrs. Langley, having completed her bargain, again turns to them, and Stella is the recipient of an invitation to accompany the party to Castle Thornton, and there spend the remainder of her holidays—which invitation, obeying the impulse of the moment, she began to accept, then hesitated, and finally declined it.

"Is there an insuperable objection?" asks Lady Thornton, with a smile, noticing how the quick flush of pleasure died away.

"Oh, yes," Stella answers, simply; "I could not leave Miss Jesson for so long."

"Miss Jesson? Is she so very exacting in her demands upon your time, then?"

"Exacting? Miss Jesson? Oh, no!" Stella responds,

quickly. And then Lady Thornton learns what Miss Jesson is to her, and how Stella cannot think of leaving her in her present state of health.

"Well, we must try and induce her to accompany you," decides Lady Thornton, smiling at the young girl's enthusiasm; "I will drive over to-morrow, and see what my powers of persuasion will effect. By-the-bye"—turning to Mrs. Langley—"where have I seen this *protégée* of yours before? somewhere, I am certain."

"I think not," answers Mrs. Langley, looking critically at Stella. "But there is something in her that reminds me of Maude—a resemblance about the eyes and eyebrows. Now I come to notice it, her eyes are precisely like Maude's in form and colour, only the expression is different."

"Yes; that must be the reason why her face has haunted me ever since I first saw it this morning;" and the anxious, unsatisfied look vanishes from her ladyship's eyes.

As soon as the prizes are distributed, Sybil Langley, who privately votes the whole thing a bore, lifts her eyes pleadingly to Lord Aylesmere's face, and asks him, in her pretty, lazy voice, if he hasn't nearly finished rewarding people for raising big gooseberries, and if he won't show her that new fountain that he wants her to see; and the earl, pleased at the interest which he thinks she feels in his improvements, smiles indulgently down at her upturned face, and leads her away.

He was very attentive to Miss Langley last winter. At first sight she attracted him, probably because he fancied that he could trace in her a slight resemblance to one who had once held sway in his heart, but who now slept calmly beneath the daisies in the shadow of the old church tower; and afterwards, fancying the resemblance extended to mind and heart, he allowed his own heart to get into the keeping of Miss Langley's careless fingers, and rendered her such homage as no honourable man would pay to a woman to whom he did not intend to offer his hand—homage so open and

undisguised, that he would be compromised in the opinion of honourable men, did he now choose to withdraw it.

But Lord Aylesmere has no thought of withdrawing. To him Sybil Langley is all that she chooses to seem to be, the sweetest and best of her sex; and she, consummate actress as she is, having set her mind upon the conquest of this true, upright man, bends all her energies to that object, and is careful to keep up the illusion. True, he is old enough to be her father; but what of that?—the greater glory if she succeed in bringing him to her feet.

And he, in the simple humility of his great love, thinks how unlikely it is that this girl in the first flush of womanhood should care for an old man like himself, and dares not risk a refusal by putting his fate to the test at once. No, he will wait patiently, and try to win her love before he asks her to be the mistress of his heart and home.

Better far for him if he had never made that decision. Better far, had he chosen this sunny August day to lay at her feet the love of his true, devoted heart. He would have gone away from her with her scornful rejection ringing in his ears; but the pain, though great, would not have been incurable, and it would have been better, far better, far easier to endure than life-long bondage to a nature so inferior to his own.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### STRUCK BY LIGHTNING.

SYBIL LANGLEY, her dinner toilette completed, sat at the open window of the luxuriously appointed dressing-room set apart for her use at Weyburn Park, her white forehead contracted with a slight frown, a scornful

curl upon her red lips, as her eyes wandered over the wide domain that called Lord Aylesmere master.

"I wish the old idiot was a little younger," she muttered, "or else a great deal older—there would be a chance of his going off soon then. But as it is, well, I might do worse, I daresay. This estate is worth having certainly, if one could have it without the man; but with him—bah! Come in," impatiently, as a light knock sounded at the door; and the ungracious summons was obeyed by her mother.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" observed Sybil. "Well, I'm not sorry you came, because I've something to say to you."

Mrs. Langley seated herself upon a sofa, and waited quietly for the "something."

"Is that girl gone?" Miss Langley's imperious voice demanded at length.

"Yes. Duke is driving her home in the phaeton. Lord Aylesmere asked her to stay to dinner, but she declined."

"Asked her to stay to dinner! Of course that was out of compliment to us, but it was a piece of folly just the same. And Duke is driving her home, is he? It's perfectly ridiculous, the fuss he makes about that girl!" said Sybil, contemptuously. "And you are very nearly as bad, mamma. I can't think what the pair of you see in her—a common street-beggar!"

"Hush, my dear; we have nothing to do with what she was—she is no beggar now——"

"And pray what ~~is~~ she now?" interrupted Sybil, impatiently. "A dependant on your charity—and what is that better than a beggar?"

"My dear, she is very lady-like and pretty; she repays us for any expense that she has caused us."

"Pretty!" echoed Sybil, with a scornful laugh. "Lady-like! She is dressed like a lady, certainly; and that is what I wanted to ask you about."

"Well?" as Sybil paused.

"I have never yet interfered in your or Duke's arrangements respecting her," Sybil went on, coldly. "But if you come to allowing her an income that will



permit her to dress as she was dressed to-day, in Indian muslin and rare old lace, I certainly object to it. If Duke has no more sense than to throw away his money in that style, it's time somebody undertook to teach him better. What amount do you allow that girl to spend in dress in a year?"

"Nothing. Hitherto the arrangements have been made with Madame Oliphant: Duke has paid her a certain sum per annum, and she has attended to Stella's dress."

"Oh!" said Sybil, sarcastically; "Madame is slightly changed since I had the pleasure of knowing her, if she spends her money in dressing up her pupils like princesses."

"She had nothing to do with the dress that has so excited your indignation, my dear. I confess I was a little surprised when I saw it; and I complimented Stella upon her taste. But she told me frankly that the dress was not hers, poor child."

"Well," said Sybil, rising, as the dinner-bell sounded through the house, "all I have to say is, if that girl has one grain of self-respect in her, she will refuse to hang any longer upon your bounty, and insist upon earning her own living."

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"You have enjoyed this day?" Duke said, letting the ponies subside into a walk.

"Oh, so much!" responded Stella, quickly. "I do not know how to thank you for it, Sir Marmaduke."

"It isn't I whom you have to thank," smiled Duke; "it is Lord Aylesmere, you know."

"Ah, yes, partly," said Stella, in a low tone, vibrating with intense feeling. "But it is you, Sir Marmaduke, who have been the primary cause of it all—you whom I have to thank, whom I always shall thank, for every pleasure that has ever fallen to my lot."

Duke turned and looked earnestly at the glowing face beside him. He did not speak for a moment, and when he did, the words were rather irrelevant.

"How the child has grown!" he said, musingly. "Time is indeed a wondrous magician. He touches

her with his wand, and, lo, the transformation is complete,—the child is a woman !”

“Did you expect to find me still a child ?” questioned Stella, laughingly.

“I hardly know what I did expect,” answered Duke, rather gravely. “I wonder what——” checking himself suddenly, he whipped up the ponies with an abstracted air.

“May I finish your sentence for you ?” asked Stella, merrily.

“If you can,—certainly,” he answered, a little surprised.

“I am just realising that I have a grown-up young woman, instead of a child, upon my hands ; I wonder what I can do with her,” Stella hazarded, half-laughing, but with a dash of nervousness in her voice.

The venture chimed in so nearly with his unspoken thought, that Duke could only look at her in amazement.

“Are you a witch ?” he demanded, presently.

“Not exactly,” Stella said, reassured by his tone. “Will you forgive me, Sir Marmaduke, if I relieve you at once of all anxiety upon that score, if I take this opportunity of saying what I have long wished to say to you,—that I have in some degree taken my future into my own hands ?”

“What do you mean, child ? You have not——” began Duke, hastily.

“Oh, no, not that,” said Stella, quickly, divining his thought, while a slow flush rose to her cheek, as she remembered how near she had been to having to give another answer,—so near that only another’s fickleness, not her own prudence, had saved her. “Not that. Only I had a talk with Madame some time ago, and she has promised to procure me an engagement as governess in some quiet family,—she can do it easily, she says.”

“But not yet,” objected Duke. “You are too young for such a life yet, child.”

“I am nearly eighteen,” said Stella, quietly. “It is

time, Sir Marmaduke, that I was doing something for myself. I cannot bear longer to be a helpless burden upon your generosity. I trust I am not over-rating my powers; but with the education that your kindness has afforded me, I ought not to be incapable of undertaking the tuition of others,—young children, of course, I mean.”

“My child, there is no need for you to do anything of the kind, at present, at least,” said Duke, earnestly. “You must be content to remain in your present position a while longer, till some advantageous opportunity offers itself. I do not like the idea of your becoming a governess. It is a life of toil and drudgery at the best, and at the worst,—my child, you must not think of it.”

“But I must,” replied Stella, brightly. “Or, rather, I have thought, and now I must act. I know something of the trials that beset a governess, Sir Marmaduke, and I have confidence in my strength to combat them. At any rate, I will not shrink from the battle at the very outset.”

In vain Sir Marmaduke expostulated, and argued, and objected. Stella would not be convinced, nor would she yield an inch of the position she had taken up.

“Well,” Duke said at last, half-vexed, and half-laughing, “it seems that I do not possess

*‘the strength or skill  
To stem the torrent of a woman’s will;  
For if she will, she will, you may depend on’t,  
And if she won’t, she won’t, and there’s an end on’t!’*

But don’t suppose, you feminine Don Quixote, that I will consent to your being entirely dependent upon your own exertions. I shall settle fifty pounds a year upon you; that will, at least, keep you from actual want.”

“Actual want!” exclaimed Stella. “I should think it would, indeed, if I accepted it. But I cannot do it, Sir Marmaduke.”

“Well, I can, and shall,” said Duke, smiling with conscious power.

"You will not, if you please, Sir Marmaduke. You forget that I might just as well stay at Sylvester Hall at your expense, as take advantage of your generosity in that way. I should only make a pretence of earning my living, because it would be already secured to me."

"But, Stella, you may be ill, or without an engagement, or a thousand things may happen, that will prevent your earning your own living; I want to secure you against any such contingency."

"How good you are!" cried the young girl. "If ever I really need your aid, Sir Marmaduke, believe me, I will come to you without hesitation; but—but——"

"But you will not let me have the gratification of doing anything for you to prevent real need," finished Marmaduke, reproachfully. "Is that right, Stella?"

"I think it is," answered Stella; adding, with a sudden change of tone, "Oh, Sir Marmaduke, please do not misunderstand me! don't think I am ungrateful for all your past kindness, because I cannot accept more at your hands! I do not know how to thank you for your care of me in my desolate orphanhood, your unfailing generosity ever since, and the education that will render me independent of the world,—for all this I can never, never thank you! But I must not accept this new proof of your care for me. I want to work, Sir Marmaduke, and without some spur to exertion I should grow lazy—I know it, I feel it! It would never do for me to feel that I might work or be idle, just as I pleased. No, I must work, I will work! I will not be a mere drone in the busy hive of life. Do not wish to give me such an inducement to idleness as that money would be, Sir Marmaduke! Believe me, it will be kinder to let me feel that there is a necessity for me to exert myself."

Marmaduke looked at the flushed, eager face, the magnificent pleading eyes raised entreatingly to his, and thought it might perhaps be the truest kindness to let her have her way—to let her think, at least, that she was independent. He could take care that she was in no danger of want just the same.

"Well," he said at length, "if I consent to this scheme of yours, will you promise me that, on the slightest indication of trouble—trouble of any kind, mind—you will——"

"Come to you to drive it away!" she said, gaily. "Oh, yes, solemnly. Did you ever see a prettier place than Cleighton, Sir Marmaduke? Ah! here we are at Sylvester Hall."

A vivid flash of lightning—herald of the coming storm—frightened the ponies, as Duke was helping Stella down from the carriage, and they started forward. She would have fallen, but Duke caught her, and landed her safely on the pavement.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, anxiously.

"Oh, no"—with a laugh. "But look at your ponies, Sir Marmaduke—they are half-way down the street."

They were quickly recovered; and, after soothing them into something like quietness, Duke drove off again, notwithstanding Stella's entreaties that he would wait a little, till the storm was over.

When Stella, after returning her borrowed plumes to their owner, and resuming her ordinary dress, at last sought her chamber, she felt no disposition to sleep. The atmosphere was still sultry and oppressive; and throwing open the window, she sat down by it to muse over the unclouded pleasure of the day.

"How good our Father is to give me such kind friends!" she murmured. "How I wish I could repay them in some degree! But I cannot—they will ever be beyond anything that I can do for them. All I can do is to be humbly, earnestly thankful for all their goodness." And her thoughts hovered lovingly about those absent friends.

She was wondering a little over the change which she had noticed in Sir Marmaduke's manner towards her—the sudden change from the light, careless tone of a man to a child, with which he had first greeted her that morning, to the deferential courtesy with which he would have treated a princess—when she heard the sharp rattle of wheels upon the hard dusty road, and presently Sarah Lynne was whirled up to the door.

There was a little bustle of adieu, and then silence settled again over the place.

She sat there a long time, while the shades of evening deepened into darkness, and night asserted her supremacy, but only to have her empire wrested from her, at intervals of a few seconds, by the blue, gleaming flashes of lightning that rent asunder her ebony veil. Then Stella heard the low, sullen rumble of thunder, and the storm began in earnest.

Stella's first thought was for Miss Jesson. Slipping off her shoes, she ran quickly along the passage to her room, noiselessly opening the door, with a soft whispered—

"Are you awake, Miss Jesson?"

"Yes, and dressed," answered Miss Jesson's voice within the room. "I felt as if I ought not to undress to-night. Isn't this grand?"

"You are not frightened, then? I was afraid you would be, that made me come to you."

"Frightened! I have been enjoying it a long time."

"Put something round you, and come to my room," entreated Stella. "It is glorious there."

Silent, breathless, awe-stricken at the solemn grandeur of the scene, the two girls knelt at the open window. Faster and faster came the lightning flashes, louder and louder grew the reverberating peals of heaven's mighty artillery. Suddenly the door was flung open, and Sarah Lynne, with a white, terror-stricken face, rushed into the room, and sinking down at Stella's feet, buried her face in the folds of her dress to shut out the glare of the lightning, sobbing and crying in a sheer extremity of fright.

"Oh! let me stay here!" she gasped out; "I daren't stay by myself—I never knew such a storm in my life! Oh!"—lifting her face for an instant—"when will it be over? Oh!" the word became a scream, as an unusually vivid gleam flashed into her dazzled eyes.

Vainly Miss Jesson and Stella tried to soothe her—to instil into her mind some of the calm confidence in infinite love that filled their own hearts—to lift her

thoughts out of the wild unreasoning terror that possessed her—she would not listen. For more than two hours she knelt there, trembling and moaning in an agony of fear, only lifting her head occasionally, to cry out, “Oh! it is dreadful—dreadful! When will it be over?”

With all the wild roar and fury of the elements, not a drop of rain had fallen; but the air grew perceptibly colder, and the girls were at last compelled to close the window, to shelter themselves from the fierce raging of the wind.

A minute’s still, ominous silence, followed by a dreadful crashing peal that shook the house to its very foundations, and one dazzling, blinding flash, then a strong, peculiar sulphurous smell—and Stella’s eyes tried to pierce the darkness in the direction of Miss Jesson’s face. But she could not see if it reflected her own vague fear, till the next arrowy gleam showed it pale and slightly troubled.

“What is that?” said Stella, softly.

But the increasing sulphurous smell, and the smoke, which now filled the room, answered the question, even before Miss Jesson’s white lips tremblingly framed the words—

“The house has been struck by lightning—it is on fire!”

To rush to the door was the first impulse. But the stairs were already burning, and the choking powdery smoke, rushing up into their faces, drove the girls back into the room.

“Quick! tear up the sheets and blankets!” cried Stella. “Begin directly, while I go and rouse the others!” and dipping her handkerchief into the water jug, Stella tied it over her mouth, and was gone. Groping her way through the heat and smoke to Madame’s room, she rattled away at the door till she roused her, and then rushed off up the crackling stairs to the attics, in search of the servants, who slept there. With some difficulty they were made to understand the state of affairs, and Stella, bidding them follow her at once, or they would be too late, hastened

back to help with the making of the ropes that she believed were the only means of escape left them. She knew that the house was very old and dry, and, with such a wind, its destruction would in all probability be only the work of a few minutes. With trembling, nervous fingers, she and Miss Jesson worked. Sarah was too much paralysed by terror to render them any assistance.

But ere the task was completed, help from outside was at hand. A crowd had collected before the house, and a ladder had been placed against the window of Madame's room, and she and her husband, and the two servants, who had sought refuge there, were saved. But still no aid came to the three trembling girls, two of whom were knotting strips of linen together with frantic, desperate haste; and little jets of flame began to creep under the door, and the boards grew hot beneath their feet.

At length a ladder was thrown against the wall, and dashing the window open, a young man sprang through, then a voice rang through the dense smoke that filled the room—

"Stella, my darling, where are you? Come! I will save you!"

But Stella drew back from the outstretched arms.

"Save her first!" she said, pointing to the corner of the room, where the red glare of the fire revealed Sarah's huddled, abject figure.

"No, no! you first!" cried John Cadburn. "Quick! there is no time to lose—come, Stella!"

"Save her!" repeated Stella, imperatively. Then, throwing one arm round Miss Jesson, she whispered, "Forgive me, darling! but she is less ready to die than you; and, Heaven helping me, I will save you yet!"

But the loving words were unheard; Miss Jesson had fainted.

Suddenly John Cadburn turned away and raised Sarah in his arms. Staggering with her towards the window, he stumbled, and fell heavily against the dressing-table, knocking down and overturning a rose-wood workbox that stood upon it.



The contents were scattered upon the floor—among them a little hermetically sealed tin box, which even in that awful moment attracted his attention, and, prompted by an irresistible impulse, he stooped, picked it up, and placed it in his pocket, unseen, unheeded by either of the actors in that terrible scene. Scarcely a second of time had been lost by this proceeding, and in another second he was out of the window, whither Stella had already dragged her friend, and bearing Miss Lynne down the ladder to safety.

How she succeeded in getting Miss Jesson, insensible as she was, through the window, or in gaining a firm foothold upon the ladder, Stella never knew. Desperation lent her strength for that, and to stagger down one or two rounds of the ladder, still tightly clasping the limp, senseless form. She was conscious of a ringing English cheer greeting her appearance—conscious that somebody had rushed up the ladder to meet her, and was taking Miss Jesson from her relaxing grasp—and then, dizzy, breathless, and utterly exhausted, she sank to the ground.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CASTLE THORNTON.

A YOUNG girl was reclining in the deep old-fashioned window-seat of the breakfast-room at Castle Thornton, her eyes resting upon the emerald-hued lawn, jewelled here and there with glowing, variegated flower-beds. The morning light fell full upon her face, a dark, dreamily beautiful face, with a clear, creamy complexion, flushing in the cheeks to a delicate rose-leaf tinge, large almond-shaped, darkly grey eyes, and full, ripe, tender lips. No pen can do justice to Maude Thornton's exquisite loveliness, heightened this morning by a pensive shadow, which slightly saddened the

usually smiling lips, and lingered in the depths of the liquid eyes.

"Coming to-morrow!" she murmured at length, with a sigh. "And I—am I glad or sorry, I wonder? Glad I ought to be—I will be! It is treachery to be otherwise; and yet—oh, Duke, Duke! I wish you had waited a little longer before you asked me to ratify the engagement our parents made for us so long ago!"

Ah, truant heart, would your answer, in that case, have been just the same?

"What, dreaming this lovely morning! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"—and a curly chestnut head was thrust round the partially open door. "That's the worst of being a belle and a beauty—you can't do your dreaming in bed, like ordinary people, but you must lie awake half the night, thinking over the flattering speeches that you have been listening to, and then dream half the day, to make up for it."

"Don't you mean to let any part of you be visible this morning, except your head?" said Maude, waking up from her reverie with a laugh.

"Bless you, yes; only I thought it advisable not to come upon you all at once," responded the owner of the head, bringing in the rest of the body after it. "Isn't breakfast ready? I'm as hungry as a hunter."

"Ring for it, then."

The young lady bestowed a vigorous pull upon the bell-rope, and then came round to the window-seat, catching up a photographic album on the way, therewith to while away the time till breakfast came in; turning over the leaves with a running commentary upon the portraits as she did so.

"Hum! Lord Aylesmere—looks as if he had run a poker down his back, and wanted to see if it was in the right place; Lady Barker—reminds one of a little fat porker. Oh, I say, Maude, who's this fellow?"

"Which fellow?" questioned Maude, the rose-tint deepening a little.

"Why, this handsome, foreign-looking fellow—here, this one,"—thrusting the album into Maude's hands.

"That is Count Sadseldorf," Maude informed her, without glancing at the album.

"My word! what a name! I should never say it all at once, I'm sure—I should have to say one half, and then stop and take breath before venturing on the other. Does his other appellative match with this one for primitive simplicity?"

"I daresay you will think so. His other name is Vladimir, I believe. He is a Russian nobleman."

"Oh, that's comparatively decent. Russian, is he? How did you happen to know him?"

"We met him in Germany last autumn."

"Is he clever, accomplished, agreeable?" asked Belle, studying the portrait.

"Yes, all three," said Maude, as if tired of the subject.

"Don't you like him?" queried Belle, suddenly, looking up at the face opposite her.

"Yes, very well,"—nonchalantly.

"Oh, I thought perhaps you didn't."

"Why?"

"You didn't seem to care to talk about him."

"Well, why should I? Here comes breakfast, Belle, and the postbag."

Unlocking the bag, Maude drew out a little heap of letters.

"One for me, from mamma; and one for you, Belle—from Cousin Tom, I think,"—with a mischievous smile.

"What does the idiot want to write to me for?" queried Miss Belle, pouncing upon the letter, however, with remarkable haste for a young lady not a bit interested in the writer.

"What news, may I inquire?" asked Miss Ashleigh, after perusing her own closely written epistle.

"Very little news; only mamma tells me that, besides her original party, she will bring with her two young ladies, in one of whom she seems to be very much interested—a Miss Martyn."

"Martyn! Stella Martyn?" said Belle, quickly.

"Yes, I believe so," answered Maude, referring to

the letter. "Yes, that is the name. Why? Do you know her?"

"Know her? Rather!" responded Belle, helping herself to a slice of ham. "Nice girl she is! clever, too—only so industriously studious. I used to get awfully fatigued sometimes just watching her fag away at those books. Ward or something of Sir Marmaduke's, isn't she?"

"I do not know."

Breakfast over, the two young girls betook themselves, with some light fancy-work, to a rustic seat under a large walnut tree upon the lawn; and tongues and tatting-needles alike had a busy time of it.

"What a lovely place this Thornton is!" remarked Belle at length, her eyes wandering admiringly over the picturesque panorama of dark, rich green woods, yellow waving cornfields, and rippling, smiling lake, upon whose placid bosom a couple of swans were majestically sailing. "You ought to be a happy girl, Maude—you, the heiress of this rich domain, besides having forty thousand pounds in your own right."

"I don't know," replied Maude, thoughtfully, dropping her tatting-shuttle in her lap. "Sometimes, Belle, I think I would rather have been poor."

Belle laughed merrily.

"I fancy the 'sometimes' are 'like angels' visits, few and far between.' Pray, what degree of poverty would meet your approbation? Would you like to be a dressmaker or a milkmaid?"

"A milkmaid—of the two, I think," returned Maude, joining in the laugh. "But there is one consolation: poor—one is, at least, sure of being sought for one's self, and not for one's wealth."

"Or of not being sought at all."

"Well, even that would be better than to fall a victim to some mercenary fortune-hunter."

"Sir Marmaduke Langley isn't a mercenary fortune-hunter."

"No! oh, no! he is everything that is good and noble," exclaimed Maude, warmly. "I did not mean to say that I had been sought for my fortune—only

that I might have been, and how much happier young girls must be who are far removed by circumstances from the possibility of such a fate. They are free, too, to choose among their rustic lovers the one that they prefer to all others. Oh, Belle, dearly as I love Thornton, sometimes I feel as if I would gladly give it all up, to be wooed and won as other girls are!"

"Oh, yes, I can understand that perfectly," agreed Belle. "I have felt just so myself; and thought myself duty bound to speak a little bit of my mind on the subject to the pater, and the consequence was that I got a twelvemonth's reprieve—and at the end of that time they'll just see! Not 'all the king's horses nor all the king's men' will ever drag Belle Ashleigh to the altar, if she doesn't choose to go of her own accord."

Maude smiled. She had small faith in the strength of Belle's resistance when put to the test.

"Not," she began again, "that Duke isn't the one whom I would have chosen from the whole world, had I been free to choose; only it would have been so much pleasanter——"

"To have been at liberty to fall head-over-ears in love with some scapegrace-fellow, who would persist in being blind and deaf to your charms, and not caring a fig for you in return!" finished Belle, with another laugh. "So it would—I should infinitely prefer suffering the delicious pangs and uncertainties of love—by-the-bye, I'm not sure whether I may glorify myself as the originator of that phrase, or whether it's only a quotation—to this plan of the old people's of tying us up in pairs as if we were a choice lot of fowls or rabbits. It's a horrid shame! they ought to have their necks wrung for it! I wonder if anybody served them so when they were young!"

"Wrung their necks, do you mean?"

Belle stared a moment, and then burst out laughing.

"No! I don't suppose, if that had been the case, they would have been 'alive and kicking' now, to torment such poor little innocents as you and I. Why

didn't you kick, Maude, when Sir Marmaduke asked you to sanction your father's bargain?"

"A pretty reception for a proposal that would have been, upon my word!" laughed Maude; "kick, indeed! But I didn't think of it at the time. It is only lately, since I have felt bound, that I have felt at all dissatisfied with the arrangement."

"Well, that's queer, isn't it?" observed Belle, gravely. "Looks suspicious, Maude, very. May I ask what makes your bonds weigh so heavily lately?"

"I couldn't tell you if I tried."

"Oh! won't you tell me why, Robin? won't you tell me why?" sang Belle, turning, with a comical smile to her cousin. "Must be some reason for such a state of affairs, *ma chère*. So you had best examine that fluttering little heart of yours before it's too late. Bless my stars! there's the luncheon bell."

\* \* \* \*

"Sir Marmaduke!"

The voice was very timid and a little hesitating. Duke turned quickly.

"Little coward! what is it?"

The party were grouped upon the platform at Thornton station, previously to entering the carriages waiting for them. Sir Marmaduke was a little apart from the others, giving some directions respecting the luggage, when Stella, who had been screwing up her courage for some time, at last found enough of that commodity to venture to address him.

"Sir Marmaduke, have you—does Lady Thornton know—that—that—does she know what my mother was?"

"She knows that you are my ward, Miss Martyn," said Duke, smiling.

"But not—Sir Marmaduke, will you please tell her that I am—my mother's daughter?"

"What a curious piece of information!"—then, dropping his jesting tone, Duke said, rather gravely, "Don't you know me well enough to feel that that is an unnecessary question, Stella?"

"Yes, I thought I did," she answered, colouring a

little at the implied reproach. "Only I wanted to be certain that I was not sailing under false colours. I am very glad."

"There is no need for any one else, except Sir William and Maude, to hear a word upon the subject," remarked Duke; then, after a pause, "I hope you will like Maude, Stella."

"I am sure I shall," Stella said, thinking that rather a curious observation. "I wish I were as certain that she will like me," she added, a little nervously.

Sir Marmaduke was silent; feeling, however, very little doubt upon the subject.

"That is Thornton," he said, half an hour later, as the grey towers of the castle came in sight, peeping above the tops of the trees; for Castle Thornton was situated upon a gently rising eminence, and its hoary, time-worn battlements could be seen for miles, in every direction. A magnificent avenue, as straight as a line, stretched away through the park for more than two miles from the principal entrance.

Presently the carriage entered the avenue, the wheels making no sound as they rolled over the short, springy grass, and Stella sat perfectly quiet, her hands clasped in her lap, and her face a picture of delighted admiration.

"This is Thornton," repeated Duke, as the carriage stopped, "and—this is Maude!" as a young girl came swiftly towards them, a glow of pleasure lighting up her face.

"Queen Rose of the rosebud garden of girls!" murmured Stella, almost breathless with admiration of the exquisite face presented to her view.

"What do you think of it—and her?" asked Duke, a little eagerly, his eye coming to Stella's face to note the impression made upon her by such unexpected beauty.

"It is lovely—perfectly lovely! and she—she is an incarnate dream!" answered Stella, with enthusiasm, still unable to remove her eyes from Maude's face.

Duke laughed. And presently the beautiful face that Stella was watching so earnestly came round to the

side of the low, open carriage, and a little white hand was held out for Stella to clasp. Maude, looking up, met the eager, intent gaze fixed upon her with a quiet searching glance, then, as if satisfied with the result of the scrutiny, suddenly leaned forward and pressed her ripe red lips to Stella's cheek, saying warmly—

"We shall be friends, I know. What are you laughing at, Sybil?"

"So unusual a demonstration from the exclusive Miss Thornton can scarcely fail to provoke a smile," returned Sybil.

A quick retort was upon Maude's lips, but she crushed it back, and turned her attention again to Stella, till Duke, to whom she had not yet spoken, asked her, good-humouredly, if she had made a vow not to do so, when, conscience-smitten, Miss Maude hastened to atone for her previous neglect.

The first thing that caught Stella's eye when she entered the apartment allotted to her, was a large trunk, standing in the middle of the floor, addressed to Miss Stella Martyn. Upon examination, this was found to contain about half a dozen evening dresses, fashionably made and elegantly trimmed, of the exact tints that best suited her complexion, besides two or three delicate, exquisitely fine white muslins.

Two or three happy tears fell on the contents of the trunk, for the young girl was almost overpowered by this fresh proof of thoughtful care. But soon recovering herself, she was about to proceed with her toilette, when she heard a respectful rap at the door, and, opening it, discovered upon the threshold a smart French maid, who announced that she had come to offer her services to Mademoiselle.

"Mademoiselle" opened her eyes in surprise, and stammered out something about "being very much obliged," and "thinking she could manage by herself."

But Julie respectfully suggested that she had received her instructions from Miss Thornton, and intended to obey them; and presently her light, deft fingers were busying themselves arranging "Mademoi-



selle's" hair in an elaborate fashionable tangle of "puffs" and curls, and crimps and braids; Stella viewing her operations in the mirror before her with amazement, too much awed to venture upon a single remonstrance, even had there been any need. But there was not. Nothing could have been more becoming to her fresh young face than the result of Julie's skill and taste.

"You have quite transformed me, Julie," she observed, turning away from the glass, with a little thrill of pardonable girlish vanity.

Julie looked pleased, and went to open the door to somebody who was performing the Marseillaise upon it outside. There was a rush—a rustle of silken garments, and Stella's hands were suddenly and warmly clasped, and an exclamation of pleased welcome rang in her ears, and looking up, she found herself face to face with Belle Ashleigh. Belle, very little altered from her old self, only transformed into a fashionable young lady, radiant in blue silk, and with pearls gleaming upon her snowy neck and arms, and among the clustering curls of her chestnut hair.

"Aren't you nearly dressed?" she inquired, when the first little hubbub of greeting was over. "It's nearly time we went downstairs. What are you going to wear?"

"White muslin, I think; that will do, won't it?"

"Gracious, no!—won't do at all. Haven't you got anything else?"

"Yes," said Stella, pointing to the trunk. "Why won't it do, Belle?"

"Bless the child! why, there's to be a grand dinner-party to-night——"

"A dinner-party!" interjected Stella, nervously.

"And half the county will be here. You must dress for that, of course. The white muslin will do for another day, when there's only ourselves. Here, what's this?" said Belle, pouncing upon a dress of pale, shimmering green silk. "That'll do. Make haste, Julie! Fits her to perfection, doesn't it?"

So it did, and it suited her to perfection, too; but an

expression of absolute dismay spread itself over Stella's features.

"What's the matter?" asked Belle.

"I can't go down like this, Belle. Look at my shoulders and arms!" exclaimed Stella, in distress.

"Well, what's the matter with them? I'm sure they look very nice and white."

"But they—they're bare!"

Belle laughed outright.

"Why, of course! So are mine, aren't they? At Rome you must do as the Romans do, you know."

"But I can't go down like this," repeated Stella. "I shouldn't have a bit of peace all the evening."

"You little piece of absurdity! What right has a young lady just entering society to indulge such scruples, I should like to know? You must go down so."

"Then I won't!" returned Stella, decisively. Rapidly unlocking her old trunk, and tumbling the contents out upon the floor, she foraged out a wide black lace scarf, which she threw lightly round her shoulders, fastening it at her throat with a half-blown rose.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied; but you might almost as well have nothing," remarked Belle, watching her with raised eyebrows. "Your shoulders show through that lace."

"Ah, but I feel a great deal more comfortable," rejoined Stella, drawing a relieved breath. "I'll get some lace, or tulle, or something, put in all these dresses to-morrow, to draw up round my throat."

"How very fortunate that you happened to bring that lace thing!" said Belle, mockingly.

"Yes, I think so, too. Is there time, do you think, Belle, for me to go to Miss Jesson's room to see how she is before we go down?"

"Miss Jesson! She isn't here, is she? Oh, yes, there's time enough. I'll go with you."

A few minutes later saw Stella sitting nervously upon the edge of one of the green satin-covered chairs in the large stately drawing-room, looking at a tiny silver fountain of perfumed water that sent up miniature showers of diamonds into the air from a stand

near her, and listening uneasily for the opening of the door; for at present the drawing-room was unoccupied, except by herself and Belle. Her heart was fluttering with nervous dread of the coming ordeal—a dinner party! It would be difficult indeed to keep the “cloven foot” hidden now.

The door opened at last, but it was only to admit Sir Marmaduke, in irreproachable evening costume. He sat down beside her, and tried to talk to her; but Stella was almost beyond answering him. She tried to look at him, but her eyes refused to go farther than the diamond studs gleaming in the spotless ruffled front, the sight of which seemed to take her breath away, and then went back to the fountain.

“Stella, my child, what is it?” said Duke, softly, after a while.

With an effort she got her eyes past those glittering studs this time, and met his, fixed earnestly upon her.

“I don’t know,” she whispered, “only I—I am afraid.”

“Of what?” smiled Duke?

“Of this dinner-party,” she said, answering the smile.

And then Maude came in, and came up to her, and exerted herself to make her guest feel at home, with such success that by the time Lady Thornton and her host—a tall, portly gentleman, with “aristocrat” stamped on every feature of his haughty, clear-cut face, and an indefinable, conscious-of-blue-blood sort of air in every gesture—entered the room, Stella’s nervousness had nearly vanished, and she went through the introductions to the numerous guests with tolerable self-possession, making a favourable impression upon Sir William Thornton, who, though inly condemning the step his wife had taken in inviting “a girl of that class—a nobody, in fact,” to Castle Thornton, was nevertheless too thoroughly a gentleman to be wanting in courtesy to any guest under his roof.

Through Maude’s management Stella went in to dinner on Sir Marmaduke’s arm. The dinner was not such a formidable affair, after all—a dinner-party at

Thornton never was—there was no stiff formality about it; everybody seemed to have come for the express purpose of being pleased and giving pleasure; and after the first shyness wore off, Stella enjoyed it all thoroughly.

Belle sat opposite her, with the rector of Thornton, a young man with an earnest, thoughtful face and manner, and evidently more than half “smitten” with graceful, lively Belle, who stood not a whit in awe of him or his profession, and rattled on at a terrible rate.

“What *are* you talking about?” she said to Stella, across the table. “Your tongue is going nineteen to the dozen, I declare.”

Stella laughed, and gaily asked her if she calculated at that rate how many to the dozen her own went.

“As if I’d been saying six words!” said Belle, gravely.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### STAR OR BLUE-LIGHT?

“How very awkward!”

Most of the group around the breakfast-table were busily perusing the letters they had received by that morning’s post. The sudden exclamation caused both those who had letters and those who had them not to look up inquiringly at the speaker.

“May I ask what is awkward, Sir Marmaduke?” questioned Sir William Thornton.

“Certainly, Sir William. This letter, which has been forwarded to me from Helstone, is from an old friend of mine, Count Sadseldorf; and he says he shall follow it immediately, expecting to arrive in England on the seventh—yesterday, you know. He is probably at Helstone by this time, or within a few hours’ journey of it, and I am here, unfortunately.”

“Very fortunately, I think,” amended his host, with a stately smile. “You must send a telegram to Hel-

stone, bidding him come on here at once. We shall be very happy to see him, shall we not, Maudie?"

But Maude was apparently engrossed in her own letter, and did not seem to hear; only Belle, directing a quizzical glance that way, noticed that the sheet of paper trembled slightly.

"You know him, then?" asked Duke.

"Oh, yes; and like him very much," said Lady Thornton.

"Nice young fellow—very," confirmed her husband.

"Maude, will you drive me to the station to meet Vladimir?" asked Marmaduke, after luncheon.

"No, I think not," replied Maude, with a hesitating glance at him. "I have a headache, and the sun is very powerful. But you can take the ponies—and, Duke, take Stella with you; it will be a pleasant drive for her."

Sir Marmaduke expressed his sorrow for his betrothed's indisposition, and went off, very willingly, in search of Stella.

It was a pleasant drive, and Stella enjoyed it thoroughly. She waited outside the little station in the carriage, while Duke went inside to meet his friend. The two came out together presently.

"Miss Stella Martyn—Count Sadseldorf." And Stella found herself gravely bowing to a fair-haired, blue-eyed young man, with a frank, merry smile, and long, fair, curling whiskers. The name had told her nothing; but, as she raised her eyes to the careless, good-tempered face, that scene in the past, wherein he and she had figured, came rushing back upon her memory, and she recognised him instantly.

"Why," observed Marmaduke, seeing the flash of recognition in her eyes, "have you ever seen the Count before, Stella?"

"I think so," she answered, with a quiet smile. "Once—a long time ago."

The Count turned and looked at her.

"A case of mistaken identity," he said, lightly. "I am quite sure I have never before had the pleasure of meeting Miss Martyn. If I had, I should remember

it;" adding, in a lowered tone, as he seated himself opposite her in the carriage, "Once seen she could not be easily forgotten."

Sir Marmaduke gathered up the reins in silence. Stella privately thought that the Count had lost none of his old impertinence, and decided that, if he intended to go on as he had begun, she should not like him at all—thought so for about ten minutes, and then yielded to the charm which he could always exert when he chose—and, for some reason or other, he chose to do it in the present case—and acknowledged that he was, at least, a very pleasant companion.

Upon reaching the castle, they found that the party there had been reinforced by the arrival of Mr. Ashleigh, Belle's father, a stout, comfortable-looking gentleman, with white hair and a rosy complexion, (who blindly believed that he held undisputed sway over his own household and his daughter Belle, whereas that young lady knew perfectly well that she could turn her doting papa round her little finger,) and "Cousin Tom from China," or, in other words, Mr. Thomas Melville, a tall, slim young gentleman, with a dark, pleasant face, black hair, and a silky little black moustache, shading an upper lip that would have betrayed to a physiognomist a rather weak and irresolute character.

Before "Cousin Tom" had been an hour in the house Sybil Langley had spread her net for his unwary feet, and he was soon stumbling blindly among the meshes. He had a weakness for poetry and sentiment, and she quoted poetry and talked sentimentally to him, by the hour, and heaved little pensive sighs, and stole languishing, sidelong glances at him from under her long black lashes, till he believed that he had at last met his affinity—the affinity for which he now, for the first time, discovered his soul longed. And this Sybil managed without in the least losing her hold upon Lord Aylesmere: it was quite against Miss Langley's principles to do that until she had brought him to a proposal. With consummate skill she contrived that each should believe himself the favoured

one. Sybil understood perfectly well the relation existing between her new victim and Belle; but that fact only gave a greater zest to the game she was playing. She liked nothing better than to win away a lover from another girl, and then, when she knew her cruel work was complete, to scornfully bid him go back to his forsaken "ladye love."

Tom had been really in love with his cousin Belle; but her openly expressed determination never to marry him—a determination which he, in his inexperience, believed she had really formed—had not been without its effect upon him. Sore and spirit-wounded at her treatment, he was in just the mood to turn to one who seemed really to appreciate him. And thus it came about that Miss Belle began to taste the fruit of her wilfulness in the desertion of her lover—a kind of fruit which she did not find particularly pleasant; but she was too proud and independent to make wry faces over it. From all that appeared, "Cousin Tom" was quite welcome to take himself and his devotion to another shrine; but the forsaken young lady felt it nevertheless, and felt it keenly.

Sybil had never forgiven Count Vladimir for having so thoroughly escaped her toils in the long ago, when she had been a little immature minx of sixteen; and she would once again have essayed her skill, but, as it was speedily manifest that he had no thought to spare for any other than Stella Martyn, she judged it expedient not to waste her time upon him.

"Don't you think you will be able to come down to dinner to-day Miss Jesson?" asked Stella, anxiously, coming into her friend's room, a few days after their arrival at Thornton.

The excitement and exposure upon the night of the fire had so wrought upon Alice Jesson's fragile frame, that she was compelled to keep her room for several days, during which Stella had been her devoted and almost constant attendant.

"I shall try to come down this evening," answered Miss Jesson, glancing affectionately at her interlocutor.

"Do, dear; I believe the change will do you good;"

and Stella bent over and tenderly kissed the wan, wasted face.

"Where are you going now, dear?"

"Out with Count Sadseldorf—I promised him I would last night—he is going to teach me to ride."

"Always Count Sadseldorf!" observed Miss Jesson, musingly. "You see a great deal of him, don't you, dear?"

"Yes," said Stella, frankly; "I can't help it, you know; being in the same house makes such a difference—and then he is so very kind."

"As kind as——" Miss Jesson hesitated.

"John Cadburn, you mean?" said Stella, easily. "Oh, very different to him! Do you know, Alice, since I have been here—since I have seen *gentlemen*, I wonder how I could ever have cared a bit for him—tolerated him, even."

"I wondered at the time, dear," said Alice, gently; "and seeing, as I did, that Mr. Cadburn, however estimable he might be, was not a gentleman, I have been afraid for you."

"Afraid for me?" repeated Stella, quickly. "What do you mean, dear Alice?"

Miss Jesson hesitated, passing her hands softly over Stella's hair.

"Tell me, Alice," urged Stella.

"Will you forgive me if I wound you, dear?"

A warm clasp of the hand she held was Stella's only reply; and her friend went on—

"Well, then, I have been afraid for you, because I have seen how ready—how very ready you are to respond to a word of kindness; the very warmth and ardour of your affections, I fear, render you weak where they are concerned, and must always, unless carefully watched, be a source of danger to you; for, Stella—may I say it?—you are not always careful to ascertain whether those upon whom you bestow your friendship are worthy of the gift."

"Sarah Lynne and John Cadburn, for instance," said Stella, with half a smile.

"Yes, dear; and that has made me afraid lest you



should lavish the treasure of your woman's heart upon some utterly unworthy object. Have I hurt you very much, dear?"

"No, dear—I know you have only spoken the truth; and I will try to be more careful in future. But, you know," said Stella, smiling brightly again, "it is only to my friendship that these 'unworthy objects' have been admitted—they have never been able to get any farther. My *love* I never could bestow, unless it were fully merited. I don't think you need have any fear for me in that respect, dear Alice."

Miss Jesson smiled.

"Is there no danger with this young count, Stella?"

"Not a bit," replied Stella, earnestly. "And if there were, I am sure he is worthy of any woman's love. But there isn't." And thus satisfactorily settling the matter, she went down to join the Count.

After dinner Miss Jesson was carefully wrapped up, and wheeled out upon the lawn, in a great, luxurious easy chair, and, as it was a dry, balmy evening, the rest of the company disposed themselves, in easy, lounging attitudes, upon the grass around her. Stella sat at her feet, with the Count on one side, and Maude and Sir Marmaduke on the other; and the talk flowed on pleasantly.

"Well, I feel excessively fatigued," Belle informed them at last, from her seat beside the rector. "I have been very hard at work—with very little result, as far as I can see."

"Belle Ashleigh at work! that is a novelty," laughed Maude. "What have you been doing, Belle?"

"A kind of intellectual ploughing," said Belle, with raised eyebrows. "And I find that the agricultural operation going under that name is nothing to it."

"I hope the land will be all the better for your culture," observed Duke. "Where is it situated?"

"In Mr. Moreton's brains," said Belle, with unmoved gravity. "Stella, my dear, Mr. Moreton is labouring under the delusion that a new star has risen in our firmament, and, in the interests of truth and science, I have been trying with all my might to disabuse his

mind of the impression, by informing him that it is nothing but a blue-light. But it's of no use; I might as well hold my tongue. I have always understood that blue-lights were danger signals, and this is a fresh proof of the fact; only, in this case, it isn't the craft that shows them that is in danger."

Stella was vexed that she could not help colouring. All the rest were laughing.

"Danger signals, unquestionably," she returned, recovering herself, and glancing significantly at Belle's azure orbs. "Mr. Moreton ought to know the difference between stars and 'blue-lights,' having a pair of the latter so near him."

The laugh was general again, Belle joining in it readily.

"Miss Martyn will not thank you, Belle, for airing the fact that she is a 'blue,'" observed Sybil, sweetly.

"Why not, pray?" demanded Belle, quickly.

"'Blues' are not generally considered very attractive, are they—to gentlemen, at least?"

"Not unless gentlemen are partial to astronomy, I believe," returned Belle, demurely.

"Miss Belle is quite right," said Vladimir, softly, turning to Stella. "Star or blue-light, it is a danger signal."

"A wise man will steer clear of it, then, Count Sadseldorf," Stella answered, flushing a little.

"Aye," he returned, in the same lowered tone, and with a glance that pointed his words, "if he can. But sometimes precautions against danger are of no avail, and there is nothing left for a man but to surrender unconditionally."

"There are worse things than honourable surrender," said Stella, making vigorous attempts at pulling up a tuft of grass by the roots, and feeling very much relieved when Sir Marmaduke, by some light, unimportant question, diverted the Count's attention, in some degree, from her face. But it was only a slight reprieve.

"Do you know," he said, after a pause, "I came across an exquisite little picture of domestic life the

other day, and ever since I have been possessed with a longing to realise it in my own existence."

"Why don't you, then?" questioned Duke, in an amused tone.

"I will," he answered softly, "if my ideal 'Annabel Lee' is only of my mind."

"Annabel Lee!" said Stella. "From my recollection of that poem, it is a picture of utter desolation, not of happy domestic life."

"Do you call this a picture of utter desolation?" he said, smiling—

*"And this maiden, she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me!"*

"I wish you joy of her then!" laughed Sir Marmaduke. "I don't envy you the possession of the lady."

"No?"

"No. I should be very sorry to be tied for life to a 'maiden' who 'lived with no other thought than to love and be loved by me.'"

"I hope you don't mean to deny that a woman should live only in her affections?"

"And have no life apart from them? Certainly I do. How about intellect? Would you dispense with that? It would be a superfluity, certainly, in the thorough realisation of your picture."

"Not wholly," answered Vladimir, looking at Stella. "My 'Annabel Lee' must have just enough to redeem her from the danger of becoming commonplace, and to give a spice and piquancy to the love which shall exist between us; but the intellect must be subservient to the heart; there must be no fear of its running away with her. What are you smiling at, Duke?"

"I was only thinking that, the more intellect a woman has, the less danger there is of its 'running away with her'—you don't find your really clever, intellectual women clamouring for supremacy over man!"

"Don't I though? I beg your pardon! I wish you had been with me at a meeting, some time ago, where

some of these 'advanced woman's rights women' were holding forth. I have heard men who went to tolerable lengths in freedom of speech, but the way in which these women with brains 'carried on' was beyond everything!"

"'Women with brains!' Women *without* brains, I should think," said Duke. "Don't you know, Count, that, if you rap an empty cask, it makes more noise than a full one?"

"Hum!" said Count Vladimir, with a curious curl of the lips. "What do you think of this question, Miss Martyn?"

"What question, Count Sadseldorf?"

"Don't you think the fairer sex are justified in claiming supremacy over man?"

"No, sir; and I think no woman—no true woman, I mean,—would put forward such a claim."

"I am very glad that you are not a 'woman's rights woman,' Stella," put in Maude, smiling; "I am so tired of the sound of 'woman's rights.' Gentlemen, in pity for me, don't let us have a discussion upon that wearisome subject."

"You do not care for politics?" said the Count, turning to her.

"If that is politics—no! But I don't care for them in general. When I admit you to my little sanctum of a sitting-room, you will please to observe over the door, in large though invisible capitals—'Abandon politics, all ye who enter here!'"

"Fortunately for us, we are not to read the sentence as it stands in the original—'Abandon hope,'" said the Count, with a low bow.

Maude ignored the implied compliment, and turned the conversation into another channel.

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## CHAPTER XX.

## THE SLEEVE CLASP.

So the weeks sped away, in one long, pleasant dream. Walks, rides, croquet and dinner parties followed each other in delightful succession. There were long delicious mornings, passed on the lawn, or in the quaint, shady old orchard, and evenings gliding away amidst music, and flowers, and talk—the days flew away in one charming chase of pleasure—a chase successful enough on Stella's part; she enjoyed it all with the keen delight of a fresh, unspoiled nature.

For some mysterious reason, it pleased the "county families" with whom she became acquainted to make a great fuss with her, and it became the fashion to admire her graceful figure and *distingué* face. How much of the homage laid at her feet was given to herself, and how much to her supposed position as Sir Marmaduke Langley's ward, history doth not say, neither did Stella care to inquire. She was content to "take the goods the gods gave her," without prying too curiously into their source.

*"I am told there are those in this world who suppose  
Every girl's mad a husband to win;  
But I beg leave to say, in a straightforward way,  
That I've rarely seen one worth a pin!"*

carolled Maude, gaily, standing before the mirror one morning, when she and Stella were the only occupants of the light, pleasant morning-room.

"Well, why don't you go on with the next verse?" said Stella, laughing, as Maude, after thus far expressing her sentiments, stopped, with a slight grimace at her reflection in the glass.

"I couldn't do it conscientiously, my dear. It is quite against my principles to say 'The man I could love must be meek as a dove,' etc.," said Maude, busy with a refractory tress of her dusky hair. "Just hand

me that box of hairpins, please," indicating an elegant little silver-and-ebony affair. "There, that'll do, I think, don't you?"—turning her bright face round for Stella to inspect the improvement.

Stella bent her head in mock homage and real admiration.

"Charming!" she said gravely.

"Oh, of course!" and Maude glanced at the mirror again; adding softly, "I wish everybody saw me with your eyes."

"What an idea! I'm sure I don't—I shouldn't very often have the use of them myself, if that were to be the case."

"You absurd creature!" and Maude tried to pout, but couldn't succeed, and so smiled instead. "Do you know, I'm going to write a book?"

"Indeed," and Stella looked interested. "On what subject?"

"On the—secrets of beauty," said Maude, with a mischievous glance at her companion.

"Well, I don't know anybody better qualified to give an opinion. I always thought you possessed some magic philtre. Secrets of beauty!—they are effectual, at any rate—what are they, I wonder?"

"Hairpins," said Maude, sententiously.

"Hairpins! What next, I wonder?"

"Nothing next—only hairpins all the way through," said Maude, gravely. "That makes me afraid that my book would be either too short or too monotonous."

"I should rather think it would," laughed Stella. "Hairpins, indeed!"

"You needn't laugh," said Maude. "It's true. If girls only knew how to use those useful little articles properly, one wouldn't see so many naturally pretty faces spoiled by an injudicious arrangement of the hair."

"You don't believe in one style for everybody, then?" glancing at the fashionable disarray of Miss Thornton's head.

"Yes, I do—in a way. But the style must be modified in each case to suit the individual face. There, if

I haven't sat down without my crotchet needle! Give me my workbox, there's a dear."

Stella handed her the exquisite pearl-inlaid box, and, taking it on her lap, Maude proceeded, with careless fingers, to tumble over the contents. Something fell to the floor, and Stella stooped to pick it up. It was an ingenious little contrivance for fastening up a child's sleeve, made of gold, and engraved with the word "Maude."

"What is that?" said Maude. "Oh, that clasp! Pretty, isn't it? I have kept it ever since I was a child. Mamma had two made exactly alike, except for the difference in the names, one for me, and the other for my twin sister—the only sister I ever had. She was drowned when we were about three years old."

"I have seen one just like it," said Stella, examining it curiously; "only the one that I saw had the name 'Vestelle' engraved on it, instead of 'Maude.'"

"Vestelle! Are you sure?" cried Maude. "Where did you see it?"

"Certain. My mother showed it me when I was quite a child. I only saw it once, but I know there was a spring in it—somewhere here—that opened and revealed the initials 'E. T,' and a cross surmounted by a crown, and surrounded by the motto—'Trust in God and do the right;' I remember that distinctly—ah! here it is!"—as her fingers pressed the spring, and it flew open.

"Well, how very strange!" exclaimed Maude. "That must have been my sister's clasp that you saw. Didn't your mother tell you how it came into her possession?"

"No."

"Stella"—and Maude leaned forward, her dark eyes shining with suppressed eagerness—"are you sure she was your mother?"

"Oh, dear, yes! quite sure!" and Stella almost laughed at the absurdity of the question. "What romance are you weaving now, Maude? Didn't you say your sister was drowned?"

"Ah, yes!" sighed Maude, the eager light dying out

of her face. "Of course it is impossible. She was drowned in the lake yonder—she was found two days after we missed her, swollen and disfigured, and hardly recognisable. The accident happened through the carelessness of the nurse, who disappeared immediately after it. She wrote mamma a letter saying that she dared not stay to witness her anger and grief. And we were not sorry—I don't believe we could have borne the sight of her after that."

"Did you lose the other clasp at that time, then?" asked Stella, interested.

"Yes; Vestelle wore it the morning of the accident; but it was gone when she was found dead. We supposed that it got loosened somehow in the water and so fell off—but perhaps the nurse took it away with her, and sold it."

"Very likely," assented Stella, thinking it extremely improbable, however, that her mother should have purchased it. "Was she older or younger than yourself?"

"Vestelle? Oh, she came into the world first. So, you see, if she had lived, I should not now be heiress of Thornton—I should only have the younger daughter's share of the forty thousand pounds that grandmamma left us—thirty thousand. For we were both alive when grandmamma died, and she used to say it would be such a pity for Thornton to be divided, so, to make us about equal, she left ten thousand to go with Thornton to Vestelle, and the other thirty thousand to me, with the proviso, that, if either died, the other was to have the whole. I am richer through Vestelle's death; but I wish she had lived—oh! I wish she had!" cried Maude, with a burst of irrepressible, regretful longing. "How much happier I should have been!"

"Happier!" exclaimed a gay voice; and Count Vladimir, accompanied by Sir Marmaduke, came up to the open window. "Young, beautiful, an heiress, and—crowning bliss of all—engaged to be married—what can be wanting to complete the sum of Miss Thornton's happiness?"



"Tired of fishing already?" said Maude, coolly, ignoring Vladimir's speech, and turning away from the gaze of his bright, merry blue eyes.

"Yes," he said; "Duke thought it a pity to let this lovely morning slip away unbrightened by the sunshine of Miss Thornton's eyes—and I"—glancing at Stella—"like Miss Thornton, discovered that something essential to my happiness was missing, and fancied that I could find the missing something here."

"If I had been consulted," said Belle's voice from a window above him, "I should have recommended Count Sadseldorf to commence his search for the mysterious 'something' at some other part of the solar system, for I am persuaded that he will find it in nothing terrestrial."

"Perhaps," said Vladimir, gallantly stepping back and raising his hat, "Miss Ashleigh can be induced to falsify her own assertion by joining us in an excursion upon the lake."

"Who's us?" demanded Belle, leaning out of the window, with an equal disregard of Lindley Murray and the flower-pots that lined the sill.

"The whole of the company here assembled, I hope. Are there any dissentient voices?"

There were none, except Maude's, who quietly said that she had letters to write, and as quietly resisted all persuasion to join the boating-party. She sat still, looking after them as they crossed the lawn with restless, unsatisfied eyes, and a quiver of some hidden, untold pain on her beautiful mobile lips. "When will this end?" she murmured, her voice full of a dreary pathos. "I am so weary—so weary with this constant unavailing struggle against a feeling that, spite of all my struggles, is gradually overmastering me—this wretched, intolerable, never-ceasing pain—this miserable, hopeless longing for a love that can never be mine—a love that is poured out lavishly at the feet of another—and she—ah! does she value the priceless gift? Oh, would that this weary, weary summer were ended! Would that he had never come to Thornton, or that, having come, he would go away

again and leave me to fight this battle with myself in solitude! Oh, shame on you, Maude Thornton, to have given your heart unsought! Shame on you that, knowing you are nothing to him, that every thought of his is given to another—knowing this, you yet cannot conquer this mad, insensate passion! Oh, shame—shame on you! knowing too that, even if it were not so, even if he had any love to bestow upon you, you would have no right to accept it, for are you not bound—and bound with chains that your own hands have helped to forge? Bound! Ungrateful girl that you are! Poor Duke! I almost think that you are most to be pitied for having given your love to one so weak and unworthy of you. Ah, me! how crossly things seem to go in this world of ours!”

Unconsciously, Maude uttered the last sentence aloud, and it reached the ears of Sybil Langley, who was just entering the room.

“You have discovered that at last, then?” she said, lazily crossing over to a seat opposite Maude, who was not best pleased at having her reverie thus interrupted—for if Maude indulged an antipathy to any human being under the sun, it was to Sybil Langley.

“Discovered what?” she asked, rather shortly.

“What has been no secret to me for some time.”

“I dislike enigmas,” said Maude, coldly. “Please explain yourself, Sybil. What do you suppose I have discovered?”

“That Maude Thornton acted very unwisely when she invited this little governess to Thornton,” Sybil answered, smoothly.

“Miss Jesson is not my guest, but mamma’s; and I will hear no insinuations against Lady Thornton’s guests, or my own,” said Maude, with a touch of haughtiness in her voice.

“I wasn’t talking of Miss Jesson,” returned Sybil, with undisturbed composure. “There’s no danger to be apprehended from her, that I am aware of.”

“Danger! Of whom are you speaking, then? I do not understand you, Sybil.”

“You do not choose to understand, you mean,”

retorted Sybil, significantly. "I should not have spoken, only I thought from what I overheard you saying to yourself, that your eyes were at last opened to the game that this little low-born governess—this young lady whose friendship you seem to value so highly—is playing so skilfully."

"Stella Martyn?"—Sybil nodded.

"You are perfectly incomprehensible to me as yet," said Maude, quietly. "I am not aware that Miss Martyn is playing any 'game' with which I should wish to interfere, if I could. If you mean to imply that she is using any arts to draw on Count Sadseldorf to an offer of marriage, I can only say that you will find it very difficult to induce me to believe that Stella Martyn is capable of doing anything of the kind; and it seems to me, that, if she were, there is no necessity for it. It must be as evident to you as to me that he is really in love with her, and that he intends to marry her, if she will accept him."

"Probably—unless he should happen to find out what she is, doubtless, taking great pains to conceal, that her ancestry is scarcely such as he would like to acknowledge before the world. But Miss Martyn will not marry the Count, I think."

"No? Are you in her confidence?"

"Perhaps not; but I, at any rate, know how to use my visual organs; and really, Maude, I cannot help thinking that you must be wilfully blind if——"

"If what?"—impatiently.

"If it has never occurred to you that this precious magnet might be as attractive in another direction as she seems to be to the Russian count, and that it is just possible that Miss Thornton may be standing in her own light when she so carelessly and inconsiderately throws the piece of lodestone into the society of her own betrothed husband."

"Sybil!" After that one outburst there was perfect silence between the two, during which Sybil's eyes, with a cold, meaning light in them, were fixed upon the lovely face opposite her—till the white eyelids which she was regarding were lifted, and Maude's

splendid eyes looked into hers, with a curious, odd little smile.

"Your brother would hardly thank you for that insinuation against his honour," she said, slowly. "But you have my thanks, nevertheless, Sybil, for your friendly warning. Believe me, it is not lost."

And Sybil, uttering something about it being only her duty to enlighten her, and mentally hoping that she had secured Stella's expulsion from Thornton at the first convenient opportunity, stepped daintily out of the open French window upon the lawn, and went to meet "Cousin Tom," who was advancing towards them; not seeing the slow gathering scorn in the eyes that followed her for a second, and not hearing the murmured words that fell from Maude's lips.

"Yes, I thank you, Sybil Langley, but not for what you think you have done. I will watch, and find out if you have spoken the truth; and, if you have——"

The result of Miss Langley's having told the truth was unspoken; but it was a result unguessed of by her, and which, had she known it beforehand, would have sealed her lips for ever.

\* \* \* \* \*

The tiny boat glided dreamily along over the glittering silver of the lake, among the golden, broad-leaved water-lilies and the drifting shadows of the trees that fringed its banks; and the merry voices and light-hearted laughter of its occupants rang out gaily on the calm summer air. Belle was holding an animated discussion with Duke, which seemed provocative of a great deal of merriment.

"I beg pardon," Stella was saying, laughingly, in answer to some unusually florid compliment from Vladimir respecting her eyes, "but I really thought that you considered them like a pair of saucers, and several sizes too large for my face."

"Oh, no! how could you have thought that?" he protested, energetically repudiating the idea. "What could have put such a thing into your head?"

"I understood that was your opinion," answered

Stella, demurely; "I have heard as much—and also that you thought I must alter considerably before you could conscientiously pronounce me at all pretty."

"Oh, no!" he said again. "Who could have told you that? Whoever it was, believe me, you have been misinformed. I could not have said such a thing, I am certain, because it is so contrary to my real opinion."

"Pardon me," Stella persisted, "I think you forget, Count; I cannot think that my information was incorrect."

"You disbelieve me, then?" he said, looking really hurt. "You place greater faith in this unknown person's word than in mine."

"I pin my faith to nothing less trustworthy than my own ears," the young girl answered, amused at his puzzled face. "If I could, I would believe you even in preference to them."

"I do not understand it," said the Count, shaking his head. "I would stake my life that I never gave utterance to such an expression, and yet you say you heard me! It is very strange!"

But Stella, with an irrepressible love of mischief, did not choose to explain just then, and skilfully turned the conversation; almost choking, however, with suppressed laughter several times in the course of the next hour, when the half-annoyed and wholly puzzled expression of Vladimir's face informed her that he was vainly searching his memory for some stray expression of his which she could possibly have construed into anything so unflattering.

Leaving Stella to the Count's care, Sir Marmaduke assisted Belle out of the boat, and wandered away with her through the woods, continuing the war of wits which had been carried on between them all the morning. She was in the midst of some gay sally, when the half-uttered words suddenly ceased, and the hand that lay upon his arm clasped it tightly with a convulsive, unconscious movement.

Startled, Duke turned to look at her face, which had whitened to the very lips.

"Are you ill?" he said, gently. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing," she asserted, recovering herself. "It is nothing, Sir Marmaduke,"—and she tried to hurry him away from the spot.

"Had you not better stay and rest a moment?" he asked, solicitously.

"Oh, no, no!"

Wondering a little, he yielded to her evident desire to move on, when—his eyes unconsciously wandering in the direction to which Belle's had been turned a moment before—her agitation was fully explained.

At a little distance from them, in the shadow of a giant oak, stood "Cousin Tom," and clasped in his arms, with her head lying upon his shoulder, was Sybil Langley.

Sir Marmaduke stood motionless for an instant, then, delicately refraining from looking at his companion, without a word he led her away. Near the house they met Mr. Ashleigh; and, relinquishing Belle to her father's care, Duke turned back to watch for Sybil's return.

Mr. Ashleigh, not being particularly quick-sighted, noticed nothing unusual in his daughter's manner, and therefore seized what he thought was an excellent opportunity for saying a few words to her upon the subject nearest his heart.

"Belle, my dear," he began, clearing his voice a little nervously; for Miss Belle had a will of her own, and was apt to manifest it upon occasion, as none knew better than did her fond, though somewhat peppery-tempered old father; "my dear Belle, I—ahem! I daresay you know what I wish to say to you now, don't you?"

But Belle would not help him out, and he went on—

"Don't you think, Belle, my dear, that it's about time—the year I gave you is nearly out, you know— isn't it time you made up your mind what to do about Tom?"

"Certainly, papa; my mind was made up some time ago; don't you know I told you my decision?"

"No, but, Belle,—hang it!"—grinding the heels of his boots into the gravel, and taking out his spectacles—"Look here, you know, you've altered it since then; I supposed, of course, that was only a girlish caprice that would vanish in a very little time, and leave you quite willing to comply with my wishes."

"Your wishes, papa, as I understand them, can never be fulfilled," said Belle, in a low, firm voice.

"But they shall, I tell you!" roared the old gentleman, getting his temper up. "I'm not going to be defied in this way by my own girl, you impudent baggage! I'll write to London for your *trousseau* to-night, and you shall marry Tom next week! I won't have the fellow fooled like this any longer, mind that, young woman!"—fluttering out a monstrous red silk pocket-handkerchief, and rubbing fiercely at his glasses.

"I think, papa, that if you consult Tom with reference to this affair, you will find that his wishes no longer run parallel to yours. You must have seen"—the voice, tremulously gentle, sounded very unlike Belle's—"you must have seen that Tom has long since transferred the affection he once felt for me to another. If he wishes now to marry any one, believe me, it isn't Belle Ashleigh."

"Eh? What?"—setting his spectacles on his nose with a determined air, and peering incredulously through them at his daughter. "What's that you say? Not want to marry my Belle? Just let me hear him say it, that's all!"

A moment's pause, and then the irascible old gentleman burst out again—

"And pray who does he want to marry? Bosh! I don't believe a word of it! It's only a trumped up tale just to aggravate me. Not want to marry my Belle? By George! he *shall* marry you! and you shall marry him—and I won't hear another word about it."

"But, papa," said Belle, proudly, when she got a chance to speak, "surely you would not force your daughter upon any man against his will? Your

own Belle, papa—you would not let her go begging for a husband in that way ? ”

“ No ! ten thousand times no ! ” shouted Mr. Ashleigh. “ Beg any man to take my Belle—a girl fit to be the wife of a prince ! Not if I know it ! But hang it if you shall be jilted like this, my girl, without a protest from your old father. I’ll get a horsewhip and thrash the young rascal within an inch of his life ! ”

“ No, no, dear papa, you will not ! ” pleaded Belle, laying one hand upon his shoulder. “ You will not let him think we care for it at all, dear, for my sake—for your little Belle’s sake—will you now ? ”

“ But I must,” said her father, looking bewildered ; “ I must punish the young rascal in some way. What shall I do then, if you won’t let me thrash him ? ”

“ Do nothing at all, dear—don’t notice it in any way,” said Belle, eagerly pursuing her advantage. “ Just tell him quietly that you have altered your mind, and will not let him have me. Don’t let him have the chance to refuse me, whatever you do, papa.”

Somewhat mollified, her father gave the promise Belle demanded ; and, much relieved, she went off into the house, leaving him still standing there, with his wrath gradually cooling down, but every now and then effervescing in the muttered words—

“ Not want to marry my Belle ! I should just like to hear him say it, that’s all ! ”

Meanwhile, Sir Marmaduke had met his sister alone, and confronted her with a grave, stern face.

“ Sybil, what is the meaning of all this ? ”

“ Of all what ? ” returned the young lady, flippantly, feeling rather small, but determined to carry the affair off with a high hand.

“ You know what, Sybil. Do you intend to marry that young man with whom you were enacting such a charming little scene just now ? ”

“ Marry him ? ” with a scornful laugh. “ What a question ! No, indeed ! ”

“ You do not ? ” cried Duke. “ You have lured



away your friend's lover—knowing that he was her lover—you have led him to believe that you would become his wife, you must have done so, or that scene which I was so unhappy as to witness would never have taken place! At least, I should think it would not," he added, sternly; "but I may be mistaken—a girl who is capable of the one course is, probably, capable of the other. You do all this, and you allow him to caress you as none but a betrothed lover has a right to do, and then you coolly turn round and say you will not marry him! Well! I begin to think that those men who cry down the girls of the present age, and declare that the purity and modesty which distinguished our mothers have all but vanished, have some reason on their side. I never thought, though, that I should live to be ashamed of my sister!"

"Bah! what a fuss about nothing!" exclaimed Sybil, raising her head defiantly. "Girls should look after their lovers, if they want to keep them. Don't make yourself so ridiculous, Duke. I will not endure to be treated as a child; and I don't acknowledge your right to interfere in my affairs at all; I can assure you I am capable of managing them without your aid."

"Probably," returned her brother, sarcastically; "I do not deny your ability as a manager of any number of flirtations, Sybil. Perhaps you will also be so kind as to inform me whether you intend to become the Countess of Aylesmere?"

"No," answered Sybil, shortly; "I won't marry the old greybeard to please you."

"That is well," said Duke, gravely; "I am glad that even you have no idea of betraying a good, honourable man like Lord Aylesmere."

Sybil stood impatiently boring little holes in the ground with the end of her parasol.

"Have you done?" she cried, turning upon him. "Methinks it well becomes my immaculate brother to talk to me of treachery. Isn't there something in that Bible you profess to study so much about plucking out the beam from one's own eye before one interferes with the mote in one's neighbour's?"

"Certainly," replied Duke, with quiet dignity; "but I do not see how the passage bears upon this case."

"Oh, no," returned Sybil, ironically, forgetting prudence in her desire for revenge; "of course not! There has been nothing in my saintly brother's conduct to merit reproach. It is perfectly upright and honourable for a gentleman to engage himself to one girl, and then to make love, if not in actual words, in looks and actions, to another, a common charity girl! Very honourable truly!"

The blood left Duke's face for an instant, only to rush back in a hot, vivid flush. Steadying his voice, he replied, sternly—

"That is false, Sybil, and you know it—utterly, basely false!" and, turning on his heel, the young man strode rapidly away, feeling that it was worse than useless to argue longer with that pitiful, paltry nature.

"False, is it, Sir Marmaduke?" muttered Sybil, looking after him; "when I know that, if you dare, you would gladly break your troth to Maude Thornton, and bring this little beggar girl to reign at Helstone! But if that ever does come to pass, *mon frère*, it will not be through any fault of Sybil Langley's. Ah! Good morning, Lord Aylesmere."

And, turning to Lord Aylesmere with the concentrated sweetness of a whole garden of roses in her face and manner, the young lady proceeded to make herself agreeable, and none could be more so than Sybil Langley, when she considered it worth her while.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### SELF-EXAMINATION AND ITS RESULTS.

DUKE strode hastily on over the green-carpeted, leaf-strewn ground, under the branching trees, without any definite object in view, save to get as far away from

his fellows as possible, the indignant flush still scorching his cheek, his eyes still flashing with the angry fire awakened by his sister's insulting insinuation.

It was false—false ! he repeated to himself ; and yet was there not in it one sharp little sting of truth ? Not as she had intended it, not as she had meant him to understand it, when she flung it at him with all the malice of which she was capable ; no, taken literally it was a pure, gratuitous falsehood, worthy only of the lips that had given it utterance ; but, when subjected to the nice test of a tender conscience, Duke could not but own that it was, perhaps, not entirely undeserved ; and coming at length to an abrupt pause, he threw himself down upon the grass resolved upon an earnest self-examination.

Truly, that morning Sybil Langley did her work far more thoroughly than she intended to do it, and opened more eyes than she had bargained for !

Reviewing his past life, there rose before the mental view of the young baronet the time when he, a merry, careless child, had sported away the short, happy days in his father's Rectory, sometimes with only Sybil as companion, and sometimes, when visits were interchanged between the families, with little Maude Thornton, the daughter of his mother's stepbrother, and the three had played together, and quarrelled, and "made it up," after the manner of children. Then—his fancy leaping swiftly over the intervening years, in which he had grown up into early manhood, and Maude had blossomed into a lovely little maiden whose marvellous grace and beauty won his unqualified admiration, for whom he cherished a warm cousinly esteem and affection, though without a thought of any other love for her in his head or heart—came the vision of his father's deathbed, where, in weak, faltering tones, the dying man asked him to fulfil the compact made years ago between himself and Sir William Thornton—a compact of whose existence the young man had hitherto been blissfully unconscious. And Duke, intent only on soothing the dying moments of his beloved father, had cheerfully given the required

promise, that through no word or action of his should any obstacle to the union of himself and Maude arise, and that, when the latter arrived at a suitable age, that union should be consummated—he adding only the saving clause, “if Maude be willing.”

And for a time his promise to the dead had not been regretted. If he felt for his betrothed none of that passionate devotion—none of that “love” of which the poets sing, and for which men’s hearts have been broken, and women’s lives withered and blighted, at least no other woman occupied the place in his heart that should have been hers; and he conscientiously believed that no other woman ever would. He had travelled far and wide; beautiful women of all nations had flashed at him their most alluring glances, without awakening in his breast one responsive thrill; and he had come to the conclusion that he was incapable of any other deeper feeling than the calm unimpassioned affection he entertained for his lovely cousin as he called her; and, feeling thus, he was quite content that—as he supposed he must marry some day—his wife should be the one chosen for him by his father.

He had met Maude and her parents abroad the previous summer. And then, thinking that the young lady had probably reached a “suitable age,” and that, though he himself was in no particular hurry, it might perhaps be time for him to “speak out,” he had made her a formal proposal of marriage; trying hard—to do him justice—to “get up” some of the enthusiasm proper to the occasion, and succeeding well enough to pass the affair off decently, though, after all, to a person of romantic notions it would probably have seemed rather tame. Maude quietly accepted him—and both, for awhile, were calmly content with their lot.

But now, in the past few weeks, “a change had come o’er the spirit of his dream.” Swiftly, though imperceptibly, this dark-eyed, golden-haired girl, with her *petite*, willowy figure, and pale, unique face—this girl who owed everything to his bounty—had glided into the place which rightfully belonged to Maude, and wakened every fibre of his being to a new, strange

life. He knew now—with his cheek hot with a bright, shamed flush, he acknowledged it to himself that fair summer morning—that every hair of that golden head was dearer far to him than Maude, with all her dark, peerless beauty, could ever become—that the world held for him no more precious thing than her love, were he free to win it, and that, though the letter of his sacred promise to the dead had been strictly kept, the spirit of it was broken. Bitterly he chided himself now it was too late, that he had not been on his guard against this strange, insidious passion which had taken possession of him unawares.

Lying upon the ground, with his hot, shamed face pressed to the cool green grass, and a sharp, bitter conflict raging in his breast, the young man passed the long, unmeasured hours of that bright summer day. But Duke was a Christian, and, though the battle between conscience and passion might be fierce and long, the victory was certain in the end.

When he at length raised his head, his face, from which the flush had faded, though pale and worn, was firm and decided. He had made up his mind, Heaven helping him, to go forward unswervingly in what he believed to be the path of duty. Rough it might be—must be, and beset with sharp thorns that would tear his weary feet, but he would walk it with unfaltering footsteps. Maude should never know, by word or look of his, that she was not the object of his life's devotion; she should have all, or nearly all, that she had a right to demand. He would be leal and true to her in word and deed—but that he had always been—and if he could not yet be quite true in thought, still even that would come in time, perhaps; and in the end he should have peace—not just yet, but some time when the sun of his life was near its setting.

Passing through the main avenue on his way back to the house, Sir Marmaduke saw a mounted messenger coming at full speed towards him, and, as he walked slowly, the horseman soon overtook him. Returning the young baronet's courteous salutation with a respectful lift of his hand to his cap, the man handed

Duke one of those well-known yellow envelopes which invariably cause the heart of the recipient to pound away rather more lustily than usual, and, turning his horse, he galloped back down the avenue.

Tearing open the envelope, Duke ran his eye hastily over the few words scrawled in pencil on the pink sheet inside.

The message was short, but the other quality usually supposed to go with brevity—sweetness—was less conspicuous.

"Barry and Co. have failed—gone to smash—pay about twopence in the pound. Letter with particulars to follow." The signature was that of his London lawyer.

For a few moments the young man stood as if stunned, turning the paper over and over, and staring at it blankly. Gradually, however, his face cleared, and, crumpling up the telegram, he thrust it into his pocket, with a low, fervent—

"Thank Heaven, it is no worse! Twelve months ago this would have meant ruin; now, with a little care, my mother need know nothing about it."

But as he entered the house his mother met him. From the window of her dressing-room she had seen the message delivered, and now came down stairs in a flutter of anxious expectation.

"Duke, what is it?" she cried. "Something dreadful, I know—I feel it!"

"Not so very dreadful, mother dear," he answered, cheerfully. "A telegram announcing a pecuniary loss that will occasion us a little temporary inconvenience, that is all. You need not look so alarmed."

"Is that all?" she asked, drawing a relieved breath.

"That is all, mother dear. Had it occurred before I inherited Helstone, you know, it would have been a more serious matter. But now I can afford to despise it, though, of course, the news gave me an unpleasant shock at first."

"Oh! and that is what has made you look so terribly pale, isn't it? Poor boy!"—pressing her warm, motherly lips to his wan cheek. "Now I am afraid

you will have to hurry—the dressing bell rang some time since.”

Very glad to have his altered appearance attributed to anything but its right source, Duke hurried over his toilette, and hastened down stairs just in time to offer his arm to a young nonentity in petticoats, with a long, thin, ostrich-like neck and very bony shoulders, who happened to be bringing up the rear of the procession to the dining-room without a cavalier, and whose very pale blue eyes glistened with unmistakable pleasure at the sight of one.

Though feeling excessively bored by her light, empty-headed chatter, Duke forced himself to be attentive to his companion, and showed her all the little courtesies of the dinner-table, through what seemed to him the longest and most wearisome meal he had ever endured; hoping by his assiduity in pressing upon her the delicacies of the table to cover the fact that he was eating nothing himself, and making a great show with his knife and fork between whiles.

“Let me give you some of this salmon; it is really excellent;” or “Try this *pâté*—I can recommend it, I assure you,” he would say, mentally wondering all the while when the young lady would have swallowed her last mouthful, and thinking disrespectfully that she was blessed with an appetite vigorous enough for half a dozen good-sized lions, with a tiger or two thrown into the bargain.

Pleading a headache as an excuse for leaving the gentlemen over their wine, Duke speedily followed the ladies into the drawing-room. Passing unnoticed his companion of the dinner-table, who was simply making room for him beside her upon an ottoman, the young man sauntered up to the piano, where Belle was singing *Burney O Hea* in a very spirited style, to Stella’s accompaniment, and, quietly taking possession of Maude, led her to a distant sofa, and ensconced her upon it, seating himself beside her.

“I want you to play the part of the ‘good Samaritan,’” he said, throwing his head back against the

velvet cushion, and wearily closing his eyes, "or to be Desdemona to my Othello, or just what you choose to call it."

"In plain English?" she said, smiling.

"In plain English then, I have a terrible headache, and want you to charm it away."

"I am afraid charming headaches away is hardly in my line; I will bring Stella to you," said Maude, rising quickly, with a laugh. "She is my superior in that accomplishment, I assure you."

But, with a sudden, hasty movement, Duke's hand was put out to detain her.

"I want you, not Stella," he said, decidedly. "Sit down again, if you please, Maude."

"You are acting against your own interests," observed Maude, as she obeyed him, at the same time fixing her eyes upon his face with a half-wondering, half-doubtful glance.

"You are mistaken, dear; I am consulting my own interests, not acting against them," he returned, quietly.

Again that quick, doubtful glance at his face, but this time Maude did not answer, and they sat silent for some time. Duke's next observation was rather alarming to a young lady of sensitive nerves.

"Maude dear," he said suddenly, carefully keeping his face in shadow, and without opening his eyes, lest she should too clearly read their expression,—  
"Maude dear, when am I to cage the beautiful bird that I have caught?"

Thankful that he could not see the startled dismay in her face, Maude answered, after a while, in tones which she vainly endeavoured to render quite steady—

"The bird is in no hurry to have its wings clipped, Duke."

"No," he replied; "perhaps not; but its captor is in a hurry. When shall it be, dear Maude?"

"Isn't talking a bad thing for your head?" evaded Maude.

"No, my head will be better when this question is settled," returned Duke, with feverish determination.



"Naughty girl! you know better; and so do I—and so does everybody. It is commented upon openly in the county. Only the other day somebody was congratulating Duke upon the brilliant match his *protégée* is about to make."

"The county' is rather premature with its congratulations."

"Oh, but people will talk, you know; and, really, in this case they have good grounds for it. After the open encouragement you have given the Count you couldn't now draw back, even if you wished to behave so heartlessly. But"—with a laugh, "with your transparent nature, my dear, we can all see very plainly what your answer will be when it comes to the point."

"There will be time enough for my answer to be considered, when the question is discussed between myself and Count Sadseldorf," returned Stella, frostily. "At present I must decline to continue this controversy. As other people seem to be so much better acquainted with my affairs than myself, it will be quite useless for me to attempt to correct their surmises, when they stray from the truth."

"Somebody else asked Duke at the same time," Sybil went on without heeding her, "whether he really thought that you intended to marry the Count, and he said that there could not be the slightest doubt of it; he fancied he knew you better than to believe you could be so coldly heartless as to play with a man's affections, in the style in which you have been playing with the Count's, only to throw him off at the last. He said that, if you did, he should almost cease to believe that goodness and truth were to be found amongst womankind," said Sybil, uttering the falsehood glibly. "And I should be quite ready to endorse his opinion if such an impossible thing could happen."

"If Miss Langley really holds such an opinion as that," said Stella, with slow sarcasm—"Sybil's relation to Duke quite forgotten for the moment—"the only conclusion at which I can arrive is, that she has been

for some weeks past contemplating the commission of bigamy!"

Sybil bit her lip viciously, but she would not show her annoyance.

"I know," she said, watching Stella's face, "nothing would please Duke better than your marriage with his friend. He has been hoping for some time that affairs would take just the turn they have. Of course, having taken care of you from childhood, he naturally feels rather interested in you, and is anxious that you should make a good match, a feeling which I need hardly say both mamma and I share with him," added Sybil, graciously.

A simple bow was Stella's only answer. Resolute that nothing should drag from her another retort, she sat perfectly quiet, only the deep, burning spot on each cheek and the tightly interlaced fingers betraying any unusual emotion.

Having said all that she wished to say for the present, Miss Langley rose, and with all her wonted languor of step and manner joined the group round the piano, the members of which were at that moment discussing—not music, but the preliminaries of an excursion to Convent Ruins, which was to come off next day.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### A PICNIC.

THE carriages were drawn up in readiness on the broad gravelled sweep in front of the hall door, the silver fittings of the ponies' harness glittering in the sunlight. The horses destined for the equestrians stood tossing their proud heads and impatiently champing their bits, waiting for their riders. And just as impatient were the half-dozen men and maidens congregated at the top of the flight of wide white marble steps.

"Aren't you coming, Sybil?" said Maude, looking over her shoulder through the half-open glass door behind her. Miss Langley, who was slowly crossing the hall, without answering, stopped before a large mirror to rearrange her veil.

"Look there now!" cried Belle, glancing at her impatiently. "I never saw such a girl in my life! I verily believe, if the world had come to an end, and she knew it, Sybil Langley would stop and put her dress to rights, and then go out and get up a flirtation with the first angel that set foot on this blessed ball of mould of ours!"

"Oh, Belle, Belle! how can you talk so?" cried Stella, who had just made her appearance, in a simple muslin dress and straw hat.

"My dear, don't look so reproachful; I didn't mean to be irreverent, but you don't know how that young woman tries me—I'm a second Job, or I couldn't bear it as patiently as I do."

"Is Miss Langley a flirt, then?" innocently asked the pale-eyed damsel that Duke had taken into dinner the preceding evening, who was standing beside a young man as like her as one pea is to another, to whom the reader has already had a passing introduction as Sir Henry Glenmergen.

"Flirt! Sybil Langley would flirt with a broomstick if it were dressed up in men's clothes!"

"Oh, come, now," drawled Sir Henry, "you couldn't dress up a broomstick in men's clothes, now, could you? How could you put a broomstick in trousers?"

A general laugh followed this sally of Sir Henry's; but Belle was equal to the occasion.

"Didn't you ever hear of a man with only one leg, Sir Henry?" she demanded scornfully; and Sir Henry was nonplussed for a moment, and then recovered himself enough to say—

"No, I'm sure, Miss Belle, I never knew a man lose a leg without getting a wooden one to replace it, and then he had two, you know. But you see the broomstick would only have the wooden one, without the other."

"I am conquered," said Belle, with a low, sweeping bow of mock humility to Sir Henry, who walked away to the extreme end of the steps, chuckling to himself, and murmuring, as he rubbed his hands softly together—

"Aha, Harry, not bad, that!"

"Why, Stella, how is this?" exclaimed Maude, who had stood an amused listener to this little passage at arms, turning to Stella; "I thought you were going to ride—and you haven't put on your habit!"

"I have changed my mind," said Stella, quietly.

"You will find it much more pleasant on horseback," said Vladimir, coming up to her with an eager air.

"I have no doubt it will be very pleasant in the carriage," replied Stella, lightly.

And in the carriage she went. Vladimir assisted her to her seat, looking as though he would willingly have sent his horse back to the stables. But Stella had quietly managed to obtain the only disposable seat in a low, easy-going little affair, containing, besides herself, Lady Thornton, Mrs. Langley, and Miss Jesson.

But if Stella had thought in that way to dispense with the young count's company, she was mistaken. Coolly allowing the main body of equestrians to get on far ahead of him, he set forward with the carriage, and rode beside it all the way to the Ruins.

On their arrival they found a simple luncheon of cold fowls and ham, and crisp, cool green lettuce, already set out upon the grass, while the long-necked bottles of champagne were cooling in a pail of ice in the shade. Belle, in high glee, was "chaffing and plaguing" the quiet rector, whom the riders had stopped at the Rectory to pick up.

"If you only got half as hungry as I do Sunday mornings," she was saying, merrily, as the four ladies and Vladimir came up, "I guess you would clip a little bit off the end of your sermons. And that reminds me, I'm half-starved at this present moment."

"Better fall to at once then," said her father.

"The delicate brown of that chicken looks very

tempting, but"—with a mournful shake of the head—"I'm afraid I shan't be able to do much execution. I shouldn't wonder if I've laughed all my teeth loose."

"More likely to have talked them loose," rejoined Mr. Ashleigh, laughing at her. "See if you can't let that tongue of yours have a little rest, you baggage!"

"Better to wear out than to rust out, you know, papa. Mr. Moreton, you're great in sacred history, or, at any rate, being a minister, you ought to be—will you have the kindness to settle a question that has been puzzling me for some time?"

"If I can, certainly, Miss Belle."

"It is only that I am in doubt," said Belle, demurely, with a world of repressed laughter lurking in her eyes, "as to the exact date when the children of Israel travelled under the leadership of 'Nobody's child.'"

"I never before heard of the two in connection, Miss Belle," he said, looking at her in grave reproach.

"Haven't?" said Belle, innocently. "Why, you know, Mr. Moreton, they were led by 'Joshua the son of Nun;' and if the son of *none* isn't 'nobody's child,' why, it's a case of mistaken identity, that's all."

The young rector listened to this sally without a smile, though most of the others were laughing.

"Excuse me, Miss Belle, but I do not like jesting upon sacred subjects," he said, very gravely.

Belle hesitated a moment, feeling half a mind to be angry at the reproof; then with a heightened colour she said, frankly, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Moreton; it was wrong, I daresay,"—and from that moment felt an increased respect for the young clergyman.

"Didn't I hear something about your leaving us, Mr. Moreton?" asked Sir William, pausing in his task of carving the ham, with uplifted carving-knife.

"Possibly, Sir William. I have had an offer of a much richer living; but I have no intention of leaving my work here."

"You have declined it? I am very glad," said Lady Thornton, warmly; while the carving-knife went down again, and after cutting a transparent slice of ham, placed it contentedly upon Stella's plate.

"Well!" exclaimed Belle, recovering from the first shock, only to receive a greater one, "I am dumb-founded! You are the first minister I ever came across who didn't think that the voice of duty called him to the place where he could get the most money. Let me shake hands with you on that, Mr. Moreton."

"Your experience of my brethren of the cloth has probably been limited, Miss Belle?" he said, smiling pleasantly, and taking the little white jewelled hand held out to him as frankly as it was offered.

"Unlimited enough to make me think very little of them in general, I can assure you, Mr. Moreton. If you can restore my faith in preachers as a class, you will have achieved little less than a miracle."

"I hope, Miss Belle, that you will some day be compelled to own that some—nay, many of us—are not only preachers, but practisers."

"I'll do it gladly, the first moment I can do it conscientiously," conceded Belle.

"It does not follow," he went on, earnestly, "that because a few by careless and thoughtless living drag down and shamefully befoul the glorious standard they profess to carry, there are none left who would uphold and defend it with their lives, would shield it from the faintest shadow of a stain, if need be, by the sacrifice of all they hold dear on earth. Ah! believe me, Miss Belle, the devoted, glowing love that animated the apostles, that nerved the faithful spirit of the martyrs, has not yet died out from mankind. There are Latimers and Riddleys hidden in quiet country parsonages, whose heroism in the cause of the Gospel will never be tested at the stake, whose names, though perhaps unknown a dozen miles beyond the sphere of their ministrations, are yet engraved upon the hearts of their parishioners, and who daily, by their humble, lowly, loving lives, enforce the precepts that are uttered by their lips."

"I will gladly believe it—when I come across a few of them," said Belle, but in a more subdued manner, and thinking, as she met the glowing, earnest eye of the specimen of the condemned class now before her,

that there was very little doubt that he, at least, was sincere in his profession.

"There is one thing," she went on after a pause, recovering by a slight effort her usual manner,—“we haven't a hero such as you have been describing stowed away in our vicarage at home, have we, papa?”

“No, I think not,” answered her father, laughing.

“One especially sultry Sunday,” said Belle, “while he was preaching, several of his hearers had the bad taste to fall asleep—an example speedily followed by the majority. Well, our good vicar kept on hammering away for some time, hoping, I daresay, that they would soon show better manners; but at last his patience gave out, and, picking up the great Bible from the reading-desk, he launched it into the midst of the sleepers, exclaiming, ‘Confound you! if you won't *hear* the word of God, you shall *feel* it!’ And that story is only one out of a dozen that I could tell you, Mr. Moreton, but I won't, out of consideration for your feelings.”

After luncheon the party scattered in various directions. Stella had brought her sketch-book, and, choosing a pleasant, shady spot under an old, crumbling, ivy-grown bit of wall, she began to sketch the gray romantic ruins of the old convent. Vladimir, stretching out his long lazy limbs upon the grass beside her, with his straw hat tilted over his eyes, lay idly watching the swift, easy strokes of her pencil, which sometimes faltered, and sometimes paused awhile entirely, in the eager, amused interest with which Stella, almost in spite of herself, listened to his wild stories of adventures in his own and other lands, and his satirically eloquent descriptions of the strange people and manners and customs to be found in them.

“I cannot imagine anything more dreary than those wastes of ice and snow,” she said, with a smile, answering some remark of his concerning the frozen regions of Lapland. “Tell me, please, of the sunny vineyards of France, the glowing skies of Italy and Spain—I like better to hear of them. How I should like to visit those smiling, beautiful lands!”

"Your taste inclines you to tropical beauty?" he said.

"I like light, and warmth, and colour;" adding, with a slight shiver, "Perhaps because my early days were so gray and colourless, so darkly sad and sombre, I place an exaggerated value on the bright tints of life."

"Was it so?" he asked, with ready sympathy.

"I should think it was," put in Belle, coming up behind them, with Maude and Sir Marmaduke. "*You* never had to stare your eyes out over big, little-printed dictionaries, and fag away at a lot of rubbishing foreign grammars till you didn't know whether you stood on your head or your heels, among the slate pencils, and nibless pens, and musty-smelling ink-jars of Sylvester Hall, or you wouldn't dream of asking such a question."

"I think I may be forgiven for doubting whether Miss Ashleigh ever did," answered Vladimir, coolly turning over on his other side, to get a better view of the young lady.

"I have no reason to complain of Sylvester Hall," said Stella; "I have been very happy there."

"Ah, I daresay," said Belle, with a quizzical glance at her; "we had some fun there, after all, didn't we? What has become of John Cadburn by this time?" she added suddenly.

Stella did not see, for she dared not look up, but she felt, the swift, surprised glances of the three pairs of eyes that instantly sought her face—felt, too, the hot colour flushing to the roots of her hair, as she answered, as quietly as she could, that she did not know. She would have given worlds, had she possessed them, that her friends should never become cognisant of this bitterly regretted folly of her past, and here it was revealed by a sudden careless word!

No, not quite. Belle, quick-witted as she was, and really good-natured withal, instantly saw the mischief that her heedless remark was likely to make, and did her best to avert it.

"I don't suppose you do," she said, laughingly. "I



ought to have taken that question to Miss Lynne, oughtn't I? Only that I don't know her whereabouts, I'd do so now."

"John Cadburn—who is he?" asked Maude, after a moment's consideration. "Do I know him?"

"Not very likely. Oh, only a young fellow who used to be very sweet upon our young friend here; and she used to get a good deal of chaff in consequence," returned Belle, carelessly, pretending to intend her words only for her cousin's ear, but really taking good care that both gentlemen should hear them. "But she didn't seem to fancy him—sent him flying, you know; so one of our mates, happening to have a sneaking kindness for this same John, magnanimously took him off her hands, and earned Miss Martyn's everlasting gratitude, didn't she?" turning to Stella with a comical face. "That's about a fair statement of the case, as far as I understand it from personal observation, and from the 'latest intelligence from the seat of war' since I left it. Oh, I say, Maude, can't we do a scene or two out of 'Elaine' among the *tableaux* on Thursday?"

"And who is to be 'Elaine the fair, Elaine the lovable, Elaine the lily maid of Astolat'?" asked Duke, who was leaning carelessly against a tree at a little distance, speaking for the first time.

"Every Jack of us answers so well to that description, that I don't know but we may get up a free fight for the privilege of enacting the 'lily maid,'" said Belle, with a grimace. "But privately I think Stella Martyn would be about the best representative of the dead maiden. Not that I would insinuate, my dear, that you are at all likely to go off your head, or to 'shuffle off this mortal coil' in a dreadful hurry, for any lover in the world—because I don't think you'd do it—but simply because that transparent white complexion of yours will make you look 'such a beautiful corpse,' as my old nurse, Nanny Vant, used to say."

"From the tone of your speech, Miss Belle, we may infer that you have very little sympathy for poor 'Elaine.'"

"I think she was a dreadful flat," said Belle, ele-

gantly. "And if I had had anything to do with her, I should have boxed her ears a dozen times a day—I wonder one of those big brothers of hers didn't do it. Fancy a girl sighing and mooning about a garden, and waking people up at all sorts of unearthly hours with her 'little songs,' just because she was such 'awful spoons' on a fellow who didn't care a rush about her, and never gave her any reason to think he did! A girl with a grain of sense in her head would have taken especial care not to let anybody know that she had acted so nonsensically!"

"Nineteenth-century young ladies do not die of love?"

"No," said Belle, promptly; "nor yet nineteenth-century gentlemen. It isn't a killing matter now-a-days for people to be 'crossed in love,' and so-called broken hearts are very easily mended."

"Men have died, and worms have eaten them, but not for love," quoted Maude, dreamily. "And yet I can imagine it to be a very easy matter for a heart which had thrown its tendrils round an object, having that object suddenly wrenched away from its embrace—I can fancy it a very easy thing for the heart thus deprived of its support to droop and die."

"Git eeout!" said Belle, unsentimentally, with an indescribable twang, picking up Stella's sketch-book and glancing at its contents. "More likely to twine its 'tendrils' round the next likely 'object.' How many people, do you suppose, marry their first love? And yet the world spins round just as blithely as if they did—more so, perhaps," she added, philosophically.

"Well," said Duke, after a while, "what *tableaux* do you propose to take from 'Elaine'?"

"Oh, several," replied Belle, fluttering over the leaves of the sketch-book. "There's that one—'Then came Sir—what's his name?—and mused upon it,' and somebody else, and 'wondered at it'—and well they might. Halloa! what's that? Just catch it, somebody, will you?"—as a little oval of ivory-paper shook out from between the leaves and fluttered away on the breeze. "That" upon its recovery proved to be an exquisite little sketch in water colours.

Two gentlemen on horseback, one of them bending down to a girl—ragged, and bare-foot, and sunburnt, with long wind-blown hair hanging over her shoulders—who was gazing down, with a face of pitiful distress, at a broken rosebud which she held in her hand.

The only one who had no word of praise for the little painting was Sir Marmaduke; the others were loud in their admiration. He, after looking at it for a moment, passed it on, with apparent indifference, to Vladimir.

"Beautifully done," commented the latter. "Is it a fancy sketch, Miss Stella?"

"No, sir," answered Stella, quietly; it being very evident that the Count had quite forgotten the circumstance.

"Seems to me I have seen the faces before," he went on. "Why, Duke, one of them is yours! your very face, only younger—yes, now I come to think of it, just as I remember it on my last visit to England—and that is the very black horse you used to ride. How long ago was this painted, Miss Stella?"

"Only a few months. I painted it from memory. It is one of Sir Marmaduke's many benevolent actions, which I was happy enough to witness."

"Lucky fellow, to be thus commemorated!" he said, with half a sigh.

"Perhaps, if you look a little more closely at the other portrait, you will discover that Sir Marmaduke is not singular in his good luck," said Belle, carelessly, thereby plunging Vladimir into a sea of mingled pleasure and bewilderment. "Maude, this will make a famous *tableau*, won't it?"

"Couldn't very well introduce the horses into the drawing-room, my dear," returned Maude.

"Oh, I'm sure it could be managed. We'll try it, at all events," decided Belle.

Stella said nothing. Closing her sketch-book, she rose, and walked away a few yards to where a wild rose-bush was growing against the gray stone.

Standing there, gathering the blossoms one by one,

heedless of the thorns that occasionally ventured a sharp remonstrance against this wholesale rifling, she saw Sir Marmaduke coming towards her. Lately she had grown strangely shy of Duke, and she would have moved away, but it was too late.

"This *tableau* that Belle has set her heart upon," he said, gently, coming up beside her,—“will it hurt you, my child?”

“Hurt me? Oh, no! Why should it, Sir Marmaduke?” Stella answered, simply, looking up at him.

“Because, if it will,” he went on, “it shall be prevented.”

He stood a moment looking away over the sunny landscape, then his eyes came back to her face, and his lips parted, as if he were about to speak, but suddenly checking himself, he turned hastily away, and rejoined Maude.

It was the first time he had spoken to Stella since the morning of the previous day. Since then he had studiously held aloof from her, quietly avoiding her, without appearing to others to do so.

That she saw, and felt keenly the change in his manner, and vainly tried to account for its cause, he knew—knew from the grieved, wondering look in the large dark eyes whenever they happened to meet his—and the knowledge made the task he had imposed upon himself, hard as it was in itself, tenfold harder and more bitter. His own suffering he could endure manfully; but to have to inflict pain on her—her whom he would gladly have shielded from the slightest breath of sorrow—he could not bear to do it; and yet he must!

Musingly silent, he walked beside the, for a time, equally silent Maude.

“Duke,” she said, suddenly, “there was real genius in that painting.”

“Yes; I know it,” he answered gravely. “Well?”

“It ought to be cultivated,” she went on, eagerly.

“Yes,” he said again. “But she is not in a position to cultivate it.”

“No. But, Duke, she has friends who are. Don’t

you think that we, who have ample means at command, should take care that such talent is not left to waste itself in obscurity, or be frittered away teaching thick-headed children the rudiments of drawing?"

"Certainly; if we can. Green or Wilstein should take her in hand; but I don't believe she would consent to have lessons from either of them. I shouldn't like to propose it to her."

"Why not?" asked Maude, thoughtfully.

"I am afraid that she already feels overburdened with favours. If you or I were in her place, Maude, we should feel just the same. Nothing can be more trying to a sensitive nature like hers, than to feel that one is utterly dependent on the charity of another,—and you know, Maude, after all it is charity—and that one is constantly receiving benefits that one can in no way repay. I know she thinks she has been a dreadful expense to me, and she is quite determined not to add another farthing to it. That is why I think we shall not succeed in persuading her to accept a fresh favour at our hands."

"But she must accept it!" cried Maude, half impatiently. "Surely if the matter is properly represented to her, she must see that it is her duty to accept it."

Duke shook his head, smiling slightly.

"Probably her notions of duty will be different to what you anticipate; and if so, you will find no little difficulty in shaking them," he said, remembering his own futile attempt in that direction.

Maude took half a dozen steps with a doubtful face.

"Ah, well!" she exclaimed, suddenly brightening, "I will undertake that Stella shall have lessons from Herr Wilstein, and that without adding a feather's weight to the load of obligation under which she is labouring."

"How can you do that?"

"Herr Wilstein shall see Stella's painting—quite accidentally, you know—and he will be so struck by the talent therein displayed, that he will at once offer, entirely of his own accord, to give her some invaluable

instruction, 'just to amuse mine self,' " said Maude, mimicking the voice and manner of the justly celebrated artist.

"But," objected Duke, "Wilstein is such an avaricious old wretch, that he will never dream of doing anything of the kind."

"Won't he?" returned Maude, with a curious smile. "You will see."

Duke saw already; and, looking down, with a smile, at the bright face beside him, made the remarkable observation that he believed she was an angel.

Maude's face was suddenly overcast, and stopping suddenly, she put both hands on his arm with a kind of pleading gesture.

"Duke, don't," she said, earnestly. "If you only knew how utterly, heartily sick I am of flattery, you would never administer the tiniest additional dose."

"Not even in such infinitesimal quantities as that?" he laughed. "Well, really, I beg pardon, Maude. I think I do not often offend in that respect."

"No," she said, *naïvely* "and that is what constitutes your greatest claim to my regard."

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Duke. "If that isn't a flattering speech from a young lady to her betrothed! Complimentary to my other good qualities, isn't it?"

Another trouble was in store for Stella. Later in the day she and Maude were resting from the fatigue occasioned by a rather lengthy croquet campaign in one of the compartments of a kind of double summer-house, covered with a gorgeous flowering creeper, when they heard voices conversing in the next compartment. The speakers being separated from them only by a light screen of trailing foliage, every word was, of course, distinctly audible; though, as the conversation wafted to their ears ran principally upon the interesting theme of the dress, style, and deportment of the various members of the party, the two girls did not feel it incumbent upon them to reveal the fact of their presence in the arbour.

"Nice little creature, that little pale-faced girl with the Thorntons," came presently, in masculine tones.

"Quite a distinguished-looking face; don't you think so?"

"Really, I don't know," replied an unmistakably feminine voice; "I can't see anything extraordinary in her myself; but that may be my bad taste, you know,"—with a small giggle.

"Martyn, isn't her name?" said the masculine voice, carelessly. "One of the Martyns of Martyndale, I suppose?"

"Oh, no!" returned the lady, in a sort of fluster; "not related in the least, I assure you. I asked that question myself. In fact, there seems to be a sort of mystery about her parentage. Nobody knows exactly whom she belongs to; for I have made enquiries, because, of course, one likes to know whom one is associating with; and all that one can get hold of is, that she is Sir Marmaduke Langley's ward. Of course it is all right, or she would not be taken up by such people as the Thorntons. They wouldn't, I should think, for their own sakes, introduce into the county a girl of doubtful antecedents. But, you know, it has a suspicious look with it; and if she had been brought forward in this way by people of less standing in the county, I, for one, should have looked upon her rather mistrustfully, and so, I know, would others. As it is, I have been careful not to allow my daughters to associate too familiarly with her. Dear me, the draught seems to come in through these creeping plants. Very bad thing to sit in a draught when one is so warm."

And rising, with a great rustling of flounces and fluttering of scarf-ends, this feminine impersonation of that charity which "thinketh no evil" pottered away, attended by her escort.

Stella had been "on thorns" during the delivery of this speech; but a warning pressure from Maude's hand restrained her from making any demonstration. She sat with flushing cheeks and panting breath till the sound of footsteps could be no longer heard, then she turned to Maude.

"Dear Maude, why don't you tell these people that

my mother was a washerwoman, and that my father was—I don't know what; but, most probably, a common labourer?"

"There is no need of proclaiming that fact—if fact it be—upon the housetops," said Maude, equably.

"I feel very like doing it," said poor Stella, the glowing red and yellow nasturtium blossoms falling beneath her restless fingers in a brilliant variegated rain upon the floor of the summer-house. "I can't bear this feeling of being an impostor, and of enjoying the favour of these people under false pretences. For you know, Maude, that even those among them who are the kindest to me, and seem as though they cannot pet and flatter me enough, would shun me as they would a leper if they knew who I really am, and what my mother was!"

"It doesn't matter if your mother was a shoeblack," returned Maude, decidedly. "They are not compelled to associate with her. So long as you are not sailing under false colours with us—so long as papa and mamma and I know you, and love you, for just what you are, I don't see that other people have a right to trouble themselves in the matter. You are not compelled to give a particular and separate account of every one of your ancestors, from the time of Adam downwards, to every jackanapes whom you may happen to meet in society. Don't trouble any more about that, dear," she added, gently, rising at the same time, and picking off some flower-petals and bits of stalks that clung to her dress. "Why, if they're not getting ready to go home! Come along."

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### FOR LOVE OF A STAR.

DINNER was over at Thornton. With a miserable dispirited feeling creeping over her, Stella stole away, unseen as she hoped, to the library; and ensconcing



herself in a low chair, in a small alcove formed by the deep bay window, let down the blue satin hangings behind her, and hoped that she was so secluded that nobody would be able to find her.

Vain hope! One pair of eyes at least were cognisant of the direction in which she had fled; and as soon as their owner could shake himself free from the innumerable suckers of a drawing-room octopus, in the shape of an antiquated damsel with front teeth like a pair of tombstones, who had fastened herself upon him, he, skilfully threading his way among the various hindrances of a like nature which beset him, betook himself to the sacred window-curtain that veiled the spot wherein his deity was enshrined.

Stella's good nature, as well as her politeness, prevented her from showing the young count by her manner that just then she wished him a little farther away; but she did so nevertheless, heartily; for she was weary, and she wanted to be quiet awhile.

But, conquering the feeling, she forced herself to talk and smile, answering his gay observations with light repartees; till, insensibly, as the summer twilight fell around them, the conversation grew more earnest; and Vladimir, pointing to a star which was just showing itself in the distant blue, said, half-jestingly, half-seriously, that he could heartily sympathise with any man who should love a "bright, particular star, and think to wed it."

"I remember once," Stella said, musingly, more as if she were speaking to herself than to him, "reading a story of a prince who fell in love with a star,—a bright, beautiful star; and, instead of trying to conquer his foolish, hopeless passion, he yielded himself up, body and soul, to the mad infatuation. He was a learned man, was this prince—deeply skilled in the weird, mystic lore of the East—versed in all the spells and enchantments by which Oriental wizards conquer the subtle, mysterious agencies that permeate our world, and bend them to their own purposes."

Stella had quite forgotten her auditor now. She

was sitting quite still, one arm resting upon the broad window-ledge, the hand supporting her head, which was slightly thrown back against the window drapery, the pale blue of the curtains setting off to great advantage the delicate tints of the girl's clear, pale, *spirituelle* face and golden hair, a fact of which she was utterly unconscious. She was unconscious, too, that Vladimir's blue eyes were fixed upon hers with a deep, intent gaze, for her own eyes were looking dreamily away to the eastern horizon, where one or two stars were now faintly twinkling.

"Well?" said Vladimir, softly, as she paused; and she went on again—

"And so the prince determined to use the fearful knowledge he had acquired, to gain possession of the glorious star. And he did use it—by his magic arts, aided by his wild, wicked worship, he succeeded in displacing the poor reluctant star, and dragging it down—down—every night increasing the distance between it and its former sphere, and bringing it nearer to earth and to the eager, cruel eyes that were watching it.

"Nearer and nearer it came, till he could see that the bright star was a lovely woman, a glorious, immortal being. Even then he would not desist from his wicked spells, he would not conquer his cruel love; in his selfish triumph he little recked what suffering the poor star endured. For that she did suffer was evident even to him. As he drew her nearer she became paler and paler, and her face grew more and more sorrowful; and when at last he clasped her in his arms, she was no longer a brilliant star, but a cold, sad woman.

"And he—he soon grew to hate her. For he knew he could never win her love—she had no love to give him, for all her heart and sympathies were with her fellow-stars; besides, she could not forget that it was he who had dragged her down from her high estate—he to whom she owed all her subsequent suffering and unhappiness—who had done her a grievous wrong that could never, never be repaired; for, with all his know-

ledge, all his enchantments, he could not restore the poor fallen star to its original position—could not give it back its immortality and unsullied purity. No! once fallen, it had fallen for ever. What wonder that, knowing this, the once happy star grew pale and sad, as it obeyed the indomitable, resistless will that drew it from among its fellow-angels, and that it loathed the magician who had thus destroyed it beyond hope of redemption!"

The soft, low tones ceased, and silence fell upon the scene—a silence that neither broke for some time.

"A sad story, Miss Stella," Vladimir said, at length. "Did you want to impress me with a sense of the extreme folly of unequal marriages, that you related it just then?"

Stella's eyes came back from their dreamy abstraction, and met his with a smile.

"No," she said, lightly. "I hardly know why I did it; but it came in my head just then, and so I let you have the benefit of it."

"Then you did not intend it as a lesson for me?" he asked, more earnestly than she knew.

"No. I don't think you are in any danger, Count Sadseldorf. You would never"—with a slight emphasis—"be so very foolish as to wed beneath you; and I don't think you are very likely to fall in love with such an inaccessible object as a star."

"I don't know—there is more danger than you imagine," he answered; and Stella's eyes fell beneath the gaze they encountered. "But all stars are not inaccessible, are they? the prince succeeded in bringing one down to his own level, you know."

"Yes; but he had to call in the aid of magic, in order to accomplish his purpose," said Stella, in some confusion, for she could not but understand the hidden meaning in her companion's words.

"And that is an assistance that I cannot hope to obtain; so I suppose my star must remain on high. But that need not make her 'inaccessible,' you know, Miss Stella. If I cannot drag her down to me—and I

would not if I could—I can at least try to climb up to her—and that I will do!”

“I hope your star is bright and pure, and worthy of your love,” Stella said, earnestly.

“She is more than worthy of all that I can offer her,” he rejoined, gravely. “She is so pure, so true, that I sometimes fear she will refuse to shine on my life-path—to be my guiding-star! Do you think she will, Stella?” he asked, taking both her hands in his.

“How can I tell, Count Sadseldorf?” questioned Stella, her eyes once more falling before his, while she vainly tried to withdraw her hands from his clasp. “If she is *your* star, of course, you know, she cannot refuse. But how can I answer for another lady’s inclinations?”

“You only can answer my question, Stella,” murmured Vladimir, passionately, holding her hands in a tighter clasp, as he bent over her chair. “You only can tell me if the star I worship will shed its soft lustre upon me, or withdraw its light, and leave me alone, to darkness and despair—you only, Stella—my star! my love!”

One almost-frightened glance Stella gave at his face.

“Oh, don’t—please don’t!” she stammered, with trembling lips. “Oh—forgive me—but you must not talk to me like that!”

“Why not?” asked Vladimir, sadly, looking down at her agitated face.

“Oh, because—because—I am so sorry—please don’t ask me!”

“Well, I will not—to-night,” he said, gently, raising her hands to his lips. “You are agitated—ill; you shall not give me a final answer now; I will wait as patiently as may be till to-morrow. Meanwhile, I shall hope—nay, nay, I cannot hear your decision now,” he added, as Stella made an effort to speak; “I could not bear it, for I know it would be unfavourable. Ah, Stella! if you knew how happy one little word would make us all, you would surely be willing to take time for reflection, before you dash my cup of happiness to the ground!”

"I daresay you know what I wish to say," he went on. "Count Sadseldorf—with a full knowledge of all you would wish him to know, my child, has laid before me, as your guardian, a proposal for your hand."

"Yes," Stella said, commanding her voice with an effort. "And you, Sir Marmaduke—what did you say?"

"I gave him my consent, subject to your own, of course," said Marmaduke. "I know no one to whose guardianship I should be so willing to relinquish you. Vladimir, is all we could wish your husband to be."

"Oh, yes!" murmured Stella, clasping her hands feverishly together. "Yes, he is all we could wish—all I could wish!"

"Then I may tell him you consent?" asked Sir Marmaduke, mistaking the cause of her agitation.

"Not to-night," said Stella, wearily; "I have promised to give him an answer to-morrow."

"I have little need to ask what that answer will be." There was a little catch in Duke's voice, but Stella did not notice it.

"It will be 'yes,' I suppose," she said, with a dreary smile; adding, suddenly, "You wish it to be 'yes,' don't you, Sir Marmaduke?"

"I?" Duke said, in some surprise. "I can have no wish except for your happiness, Stella. Don't let my wishes influence you in the least, my child; yours are the only ones to be consulted in this matter."

"No, they are not; I want to please you as well, Sir Marmaduke."

Duke looked down at her for a moment, with one of his rare smiles.

"Then rest quite satisfied, my dear child. You love Vladimir—I see you do; follow the dictates of your own heart, and be happy."

"Happy!" said Stella, passionately, laying both arms upon the window-ledge, and bowing her head down upon them; "oh, yes, I shall be very happy."

But there was a ring of bitter pain in her voice, and Duke looked puzzled; but he only thought that

the ways of young girls were inscrutable, and that he, at least, didn't understand them; besides, he was rallying his energies against the increasing pain in his own heart. He was quite silent, quite motionless, for awhile.

Deceived by the silence, Stella thought he had left her alone; she did not raise her head to assure herself of the fact, however. Sir Marmaduke was about to say something—anything to break the oppressive silence—when a half-suppressed cry broke from the girl's lips.

"Oh! if I only knew what is right—if I only knew!" she murmured in a voice quivering with pain. "I will go back to Cleighton—dear old Cleighton! Oh, why did I ever leave you? I used to be happy there!" and great, choking, tearless sobs shook the bowed figure.

In utter amazement, Duke heard the young girl's passionate outcry. He had felt so sure that she loved Vladimir, that the discovery that she did not came upon him with the force of a revelation, and set his heart throbbing fiercely. Hastily he bent down to her; but instantly drew himself up again, and folded his arms tightly together over his broad chest, lest the impulse to take her within them and soothe this wild grief should be too strong for his iron resolution.

"Hush, hush, Stella, my child!" he said, gently. "Do not distress yourself in this way. Silly child! you shall not marry Vladimir, unless you wish it."

The girl started violently.

"Sir Marmaduke! you here?" she exclaimed, wildly. "I—I thought I was alone!"

"Did you?" Duke said, quietly; a new light beginning to break in upon his bewildered brain—a light that glimmeringly revealed a delightful possibility in the future. But he sternly put the tempting thought aside. "Stay one moment, Stella," he added as she rose hastily, and was about to leave him; "I want to speak to you."

Submissively Stella reseated herself, keeping her

face in the shadow as much as she possibly could, and waited for him to speak.

"Stella," he said slowly, watching the girl's drooping face, "I want to ask your opinion about a supposititious case, or rather, to be frank, the case of a friend."

"My opinion is of very little value," Stella said, nervously.

"Perhaps not in this case. Well, suppose my friend believes himself to be loved by a young and beautiful girl—one to whom he has given reason to believe that he returns her love. But that he does not, cannot do, because his whole heart has gone forth to another—utterly, irrevocably. Stella, what is this young man to do?"

Duke thought he had put the case plainly, hardly knowing why he had put it at all; certainly not because he had the shadow of a doubt as to the right of the course on which he had decided.

The slow, rich crimson gathered in Stella's cheeks as she listened, till, when Duke finished, they were flaming with mortification. What did he mean? Had she betrayed herself? Had he discovered her secret, and taken this way to assure her of its hopelessness? Bitter, humiliating thought! Oh! if only the floor would open and swallow her up! But it would not—it would not! nothing would happen to remove her from the scrutiny of those piercing eyes; for Duke stood there, waiting for an answer,—he should have it.

"Well, Stella?"

"It is very difficult to decide such a question for another person," she said, forcing herself to speak calmly. "The girl whom your friend loves—does she love him? If she does, in my opinion, his path is clear enough. He will marry the girl he loves. What has the other girl to do with it? Why drag her into the question at all?" Stella went on impetuously, only intent on saving her pride from the suspicion which she fancied had fallen upon it. "Surely he would not insult her by offering her his hand, while his heart was given to another! And she, I should think she

would scorn such an offer, and scorn him too, for making it, and fling her love for him to the winds, if she rent her heart in the effort! But she may not love him—he only ‘believes’ she does; and what right has he to believe anything of the kind, to imagine that a young girl has given him her love unasked?”

“Perhaps none,” Duke said gravely, wondering a little at her vehemence. “And feeling like this, Stella, for another, you could yet think of accepting Vladimir, without loving him?” there was a world of quiet reproach in Duke’s tone.

“I was wrong, very wrong,” Stella confessed, humbly. “But it seemed just then as if I could not tell right from wrong. I don’t think I could have done it, after all; but I—I thought it would please you, Sir Marmaduke.”

“Please me to have you sacrifice yourself! You must have a strange notion of me, child! Well”—with a change of tone—“my friend must sleep upon your advice, Stella. It certainly chimes in with his wishes, but hardly with his sense of honour.”

“His honour!” echoed Stella. “Why not?”

“Didn’t I tell you that a kind of engagement exists between himself and the lady he does not love, and whose cause you so warmly espoused a moment back?”

A sigh of intense relief escaped Stella—she had alarmed herself unnecessarily.

“I thought you said—I misunderstood you, it seems, but I thought you said——”

“It seems to me we are playing at cross purposes,” said Duke, as she hesitated. “What did you think I said, Stella?”

“Nothing—it doesn’t matter,” Stella answered, confusedly.

“Yes it does; it matters very much, when I’ve a headache, and have ordered tea in my own sitting-room, and, instead of coming to drink it like rational creatures, you sit here in the darkness, like a couple of antiquated owls—you ought to know better!” broke in Maude’s voice, in a tone of affected severity, as she



lifted the curtains, letting in a flood of light, and, of course, interrupting the *tête-à-tête*.

Maude bestowed a searching glance upon the pair as she came forward, and a troubled expression saddened her beautiful eyes, but it vanished in an instant.

"I am going to play the invalid to-night," she said, in her usual manner; "so I want you to pour out the tea, Stella."

Stella would gladly have declined the office. But, afraid of attracting attention to her evident agitation, she seated herself behind the urn, and proceeded to dispense the fragrant beverage.

"Isn't the Count coming?" said Lady Thornton presently.

"I don't think he's very well," observed Belle; "I met him in the corridor about an hour ago, and he looked as pale as if he had seen a ghost."

"Perhaps he had," remarked Maude, carelessly, stirring her tea, as if that were the chief business of her existence. "Why didn't you ask him, Belle? Stella, my dear"—with a wry face—"I'm not particularly partial to salt in my tea."

"Salt? I beg your pardon!" said Stella, flushing. "Let me give you another cup."

The Count, however, came in just as the conversation had turned upon unequal marriages, and Belle was airing her unique opinions upon the subject.

"I think it's a great shame," she said, "that there are not a good many more of what are called unequal marriages. I contend that rank ought not to marry rank, and wealth to mate with wealth. A man or a woman who has been blessed by providence with a large fortune, instead of seeking to swell it with another, should share it with a person who has none. A very large class of people would thus be lifted out of poverty, and the surplus wealth of the world would be much more equally distributed."

"But, my dear Belle," began Sir William, this free-and-easy way of looking at things not at all suiting his aristocratic and exclusive notions, "that wouldn't ——"

"No, I know it wouldn't," interrupted his saucy niece, "it wouldn't suit a great many people—except the fortuneless ones; the biggest half of the world would lift up their eyes and hands in pious horror at the bare suggestion. So you needn't take the trouble, uncle, of setting me down with a long-winded argument,—I know you'd bowl me over in three minutes, if I gave you the chance; and I don't choose to have my pet theories knocked on the head in your dear old cold-blooded fashion. So, if you'll give me my candlestick, please, I'll take myself off to bed; for that blessed parson has been edifying me with a series of lecturettes upon my sins in general, and the special enormities of which I have been guilty to-day in particular, and the consequence is, that I'm as dull as a beetle! I meekly hinted that the transgressions of some other individual would be a far more entertaining theme, but he wouldn't see it! And to crown my discomfort, just hark at that wind! It always gives me a fit of the 'blues' to hear the wind howl like that."

Belle's exit was speedily followed by that of most of the company.

Linking her arm in Stella's, Maude drew her up the broad, slippery oaken staircase and into her own room, saying that she felt just in the mood for a chat before going to bed.

"What a pleasant time I have had here!" observed Stella, perching herself upon the arm of the big easy-chair into which Maude had sunk. "What a little box of a place Sylvester Hall will seem after this!"

"Are you going back to Sylvester Hall?" said Maude, quickly.

"Certainly! next week; the holidays will be over then, you know. I wonder whether Madame has procured an engagement for me."

"If she hasn't, it's no matter; I have one ready for you, if you like to accept it. But I wasn't thinking of that. You know, dear, I have seen—I cannot help seeing—that you need not go back to Cleighton unless you like, and I did not know whether you would like."

"I could have but one opinion on the subject," said Stella; then, answering the question she read in Maude's eyes, she added, "Dear Maude, I do not love him!"

The quick throb of Maude's heart sent the blood leaping into her cheeks, and kept her silent for some seconds. Stella rose, and, leaning over the back of the chair, placed one of her cool, soft palms on each side of the beautiful burning face, and, pulling it back, gazed down at it in admiring wonder at its marvellous loveliness.

"I wonder," she said, smiling, "what right one girl has to be so much more beautiful than another!"

"And I wonder," returned Maude, sighing unconsciously, "what right another girl has to be so much happier than one. You are very happy, Stella, that you are not compelled to 'give the hand where the heart can never be.'"

"Maude dear"—and Stella leaned over a little farther, so that she could see into Maude's eyes, with a hesitating, tremulous timidity in her voice—"surely you are happy? Surely you—you love Sir Marmaduke?" her tone saying plainly enough to Maude's ear, that she did not see how any one could help it.

For an instant the magnificent gray eyes, so like, yet so unlike, looked into each other,—one pair instinct with startled wonder, the other tender, wistful, dreamy; then gradually a smile grew in the depths of the wistful ones, and rousing herself, Maude said, lightly—

"Love Duke? Why, yes; of course I do! Haven't you seen how devoted we are to each other? We are a model pair of lovers, I think; you see we have too much good taste to inflict our rhapsodies upon the public."

Maude sat silent and thoughtful for some time after Stella had left her; then suddenly drawing her writing desk towards her with an air of decision, she prepared to indite an epistle that was intended to slightly alter the existing state of affairs.

But it did not seem a very easy matter to begin.

The gold pen hovered indecisively over the thick, delicately tinted and perfumed, gilt-edged and gilt-monogrammed paper, without making any impression upon its satin-smooth surface.

"My dear Duke"—a pause, "after grave consideration"—another pause, and a slight contraction of the jetty eyebrows, and the sheet of paper was thrown aside, to be replaced by another, and another, which ultimately shared the same fate.

With an impatient little shake of the head, Maude at length dashed off an epistle which she deemed worthy of advancement to the sealing and addressing stage,—just a simple request that Duke would release her from an engagement which she had for some time felt could not result in happiness to herself or him, and which she believed was no less irksome to him than to her.

"How angry papa will be! But I haven't felt so happy for a good while," she murmured, glancing at the small square envelope, with its beautifully written address, that lay upon the dressing-table, as, after extinguishing the light, she went to the window, and, drawing aside the curtain, looked out into the night.

The balmy evening had given place to a wild night. The great trees in the park bent and swayed in the strong night wind, and big drops of rain plashed heavily down upon the evergreens beneath the window. She was turning away again, with a half-shiver, when she fancied she heard the dull thud of horses' hoofs coming up the great avenue, and presently she saw a dark form on horseback, wrapped in a large military cloak, emerging from the black shadow of the trees.

"Who can it be at this time of night?" she wondered, with a beating heart, as the ponderous knocker of the hall door woke the echoes of the great silent house, and an instant after the door-bell followed suit, with a peal that effectually scared slumber from every pillow.

Slowly, tremblingly, the old butler, after rubbing

half open his sleepy eyes, and encasing his stockingless feet in a pair of leather slippers, shuffled along the hall, with a lighted candle in one hand and a Brobdignean toasting-fork, which in his blinking bewilderment he had caught up as a weapon of defence, in the other, and essayed to unfasten the formidable array of bolts and bars and chains which guarded the door—a proceeding in no degree expedited by another sharp appeal from the apparently irate knocker.

The much-abused door at last opened about a couple of inches—and the butler's scared face, surmounted by a white cotton nightcap, peered through the crack, and his tremulous tones enquired who was there, and what was "who's" business.

The question was answered by an impatient lunge of the stranger's body against the door—wrenching it out of the old man's hand.

"Ah, you old villain! you think I stay out of doors in this storm?" exclaimed a foreign-sounding voice, as its owner rushed through the aperture thus made, thereby narrowly escaping being spitted upon the toasting-fork, which the old butler, nothing doubting that his last hour was come, held out at arm's length and flourished furiously.

"Mr. Marmaduke Langley—he is here?" questioned the impertinent stranger, nimbly dodging another lunge of the five-pronged utensil.

"*Sir* Marmaduke Langley is here," corrected the old servant, standing at bay. "But I can't disturb him at this time of night. Perhaps you'll have the kindness to call again to-morrow, sir?"

"No, my friend, it is to that I decidedly object. Where is he that you call *Sir* Marmaduke?"

"Here," said Duke's voice from the top of the staircase. "Who is it wants me?"

"Come and see," was the unsatisfactory reply, as the stranger threw aside his dripping hat and muffling cloak.

Duke came and saw—what for one brief moment sent him reeling back against the wall, and whitened his face till it looked as if carved out of chalk,

while his eyes fastened themselves in fascinated horror upon the smiling, mocking face of the stranger, and from his pallid, shaking lips dropped the single word "Edward?"

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

## "FOR RICHER, FOR POORER."

WONDER and confusion reigned at Thornton. Hysterical and fainting fits were the order of the day—or rather, of the night—in the servants' hall. The Jameses and Johns, while shaking in their own shoes, found it hard work to reassure the Susans and Janes on the subject of the ghost; and even upstairs in the drawing-room—where the whole company, drawn thither by the astounding news, had assembled—it was difficult to realise that it was Edward Langley in real flesh and blood, instead of in spirit, who sat there and coolly told them that instead of being assassinated as they supposed, he had only been taken captive by brigands, who, after arraying a corpse in his clothes, had kept him a close prisoner, hoping thereby to greatly increase the reward when they at last produced him.

'Mid breathless silence he told them how he had at length contrived to elude the vigilance of his guard, and described the fatigue and hardships which he had undergone since his escape—the interest of his narrative being enhanced by the little foreign trickeries of manner and gesture which he seemed to have caught from the Italians, among whom he had so long resided.

Morning dawned before he or his eager listeners sought their beds; not one of them having questioned the truth of his story—how could they when the living, breathing image of Edward Langley as they had last known him instantly recognised and warmly greeted each one with whom he had had any previous acquaintance?

Duke's first impulse on regaining his room was to throw himself upon his knees and fervently supplicate for strength to bear this new trial with patience. For it was a trial; he could not—earnestly and honestly as he tried—feel glad at his cousin's return. Only for that telegram the other day, none would have rejoiced more than he—eagerly would he have given up the inheritance which had devolved upon him. But he knew, better than any other, what Edward Langley's resurrection meant for him and his. Poverty—for the whole of his and his mother's fortune was in the hands of Messrs Barry and Co. when they had, as the telegram expressed it, "gone to smash:" that he could bear for himself; but his mother and sister, reared, as they had been, in the lap of affluence—how would they bear it? He shrank from the thought of the privations that must fall upon them, and, for their sakes, bitter rebellious thoughts came thronging through his brain.

He paced to and fro in wild unrest, trying to fight them down, till the cheerful morning sunlight streamed into the room, lighting up his tired, haggard face. Throwing open the window, he leaned out, drinking in long draughts of the pure, invigorating air. The summer landscape, fresh and dewy from last night's storm, smiled soothingly into his weary eyes, and the free breeze of morning whispered hopefully in his ear.

A sudden revulsion of feeling swept over him. He was young and strong—he could do battle with the world for himself and for those he loved. How thankful he was now that he had insisted upon studying for a profession while, apparently, there was no necessity for it! Instead of working in a desultory sort of way for his own pleasure, he must now work for bread.

And now into the midst of the darkness there crept a tiny gleam of light—for which in his despair a while before there was no room. He could no longer hold Maude to an engagement which had been formed under such different circumstances—every feeling of honour bade him release her.

Duke was a different being when he descended the

stairs to what he had been the night before. There was no constraint now in his welcome and greeting of his long-lost cousin, whom he met in the hall, and the two young men entered the breakfast room arm in arm, just as they used to do in the old days, when they were like brothers.

The morning was rather chilly, and a small fire was burning in the grate. Maude stood by it, with the letter that she had destined for Duke in her hand, which she was tearing up into minute fragments, dropping them, bit by bit, into the flames, and watching them change into tiny ashy flakes with a pre-occupied air.

"You are changed, Maude, since I went away," said Edward, watching the charming, dreamy face, as they lingered over the late breakfast, at which he contributed his full share of the conversation, recalling, one after another, reminiscences of past days spent at Thornton. "You must give me, for the portrait I have, one that is more modern."

"I didn't know that you ever had my portrait," said Maude, waking up.

"Yes," he said, smiling quietly; "I stole it from the book—the album—the last time I saw Thornton."

"You are altered too, Edward—slightly," observed Lady Thornton. "You were always dark, to be sure, but now you could almost pass muster for an Italian."

"Talks like one too, doesn't he?" suggested Belle, helping herself to a muffin.

The black eyes shot a half-questioning, half-angry glance at her; but Belle's face, which was bent over her plate, was a marvel of innocence.

"I do speak with the Italian accent, I suppose," he admitted, calmly; "and I am not quite so—so easy with my English as I once was; but it will soon come back to me, doubtless. If you had heard none but Italian for months, Miss Belle, you would very likely be the same."

"Not so easy with your English," laughed Lady Thornton. "Not quite, certainly; for, you know, you used to be quite remarkable for the ease and fluency



with which you used your mother-tongue. But there isn't much the matter with it, except the accent."

"It seems to me," observed Stella, "that residence in a foreign land, of whatever duration, would never cause me to forget my own language."

"What right have you to express an opinion on the subject?" the dark eyes said as they met hers—but Edward's tongue was guilty of no such impertinence, and after flashing that rapid question into hers the eyes also came back to their usual "company manners," but not before something in their velvety blackness had struck Stella as strangely familiar, though it was in vain that she tried to think where she had seen them before; somewhere—of that she was sure—but where she could not then remember.

One by one the party quitted the breakfast-room, leaving Duke and Maude its sole occupants. He stood leaning easily against the veined marble mantle—a fine-looking fellow, and a man of whom any girl might feel proud, with his dark, clear face, his black wavy hair, thrown carelessly back from the broad, smooth forehead, his sweet, yet firm and resolute mouth, and dark hazel eyes, soft and tender as a woman's—a noble-looking fellow, though he was not especially tall—not more than five feet nine, either with or without his boots—as he stood there in all the careless grace of his strong, vigorous young manhood.

Spite of his seven-and-twenty years though, Duke was nervous this morning—evidently, unmistakably nervous. Just now his attention was apparently concentrated upon a small piece of paper which he was industriously folding and unfolding.

Maude stood at the other side of the fireplace, one hand resting upon the back of a chair, the other toying with a little gold-stoppered bottle of aromatic vinegar. She was the first to break the long silence.

"Duke!"—the white fingers, closing nervously over the pretty toy, inadvertently touched the spring that held the lid down. It flew back, spilling a few drops of the fluid on her elegant white cashmere morning-dress. With a quick, impatient gesture, she put the

bottle back into its place, and, clasping the restless hands before her, began again.

"Duke, you—you asked me a question the other night——"

"Yes,"—perseveringly smoothing out the creases in the paper.

"Well,"—hurriedly—"I think—that—that the time you mentioned will do very well."

The paper fluttered from Duke's fingers into the fire.

"But, Maude dear," he said, hesitatingly, "I am in a very different position now to what I was then. Then I had Helstone to offer you—now I have nothing! For, Maude, I am a poor man—poorer even than you think."

"No," she said, softly. "I saw the notice of Barry and Co.'s failure in the paper. But, you know, Duke, that need make no difference. I have enough, and more than enough, for both."

Duke bent down, and taking the white hands in his, raised them to his lips.

"Dear Maude, do you think I would take such advantage of your generosity? It is nothing more than I might have expected from you—but I question, if even I were willing to accept it, whether Sir William would allow you to make such a sacrifice."

"Sacrifice!" she exclaimed, impatiently; "I sacrifice nothing! If I were poor, and wanted to share your fortunes, there might be some talk of sacrifice—and it would be a sacrifice of which, I believe, I should be incapable. But, having more wealth than I know what to do with, I ask you to share it with me, and there is neither sacrifice nor generosity in the case. And if you think," she added, warmly, "that papa would wish to withdraw from his word, just because you are not so rich as you were, you do not know him."

"Dear Maude, I cannot take all and give nothing in return. When I have earned a standing in the world—when I have in some degree regained what I have lost, I will ask you to redeem your promise. But now

I give it back to you—you are free, free as air—I only am bound.”

“And I will not accept my freedom,” she said, proudly. “Maude Thornton will never desert her betrothed husband in adversity! I never thought that my pride would let me stand here and plead to a man to take me against his will,” she added, half-smiling.

“It isn’t yourself that you are asking me to take”—Duke saw and marvelled at the quick, warm flush which answered that—“but your wealth. And, Maude, it is just that which I cannot and will not accept. If you came to me empty-handed, I would take you as soon as I could give you a home, however modest it might be, and we would begin the world together. But, as it is, nothing would justify me in holding you to your word.”

“And nothing would justify me in breaking it. So it seems that it must be a case of ‘as you were,’” said Maude, with a faint smile; “and I must wait your royal pleasure. Duke, you have made me appear very unmaidenly!”

“You have appeared nothing but what is sweet and womanly,” he assured her, warmly.

Maude stood a minute looking into the fire with absent eyes.

“Duke,” she said, slowly, “between two people who really love each other, there ought to be no question of money. If there is money, what can it matter on which side it is? In the sunlight of true love, this obstacle that your pride has raised would melt into absolute nothingness!” and then Maude went away to her room, and, with true feminine inconsistency, cried for half an hour—for sheer thankfulness that Duke had not taken her at her word.

In his heart Duke acknowledged the truth of her words. He felt that, if he had loved Maude, it would have been comparatively easy to accept wealth and luxury at her hands—to take the gift in just the same simple spirit as he would have given it, had he been rich and she poor.

"What mad infatuation possesses me, that I cannot love this glorious creature as she deserves to be loved?" he soliloquised, staring hard at the fire. "Dear, generous Maude! it is hard that your young life should be wasted, waiting for one who is so unworthy of you. It should not, only for that sacred promise that through no word or action of mine should this match be broken off—only for that, I would compel her to take back her troth. There are scores of young fellows who would make her far happier than I can, I am afraid—Vladimir, for instance. What a pity they didn't take a fancy to each other! But he too, poor fellow, is unhappy. Heigho! What a lot of spoiled, foolish children we men are! always crying after something that we cannot obtain, and undervaluing the things which properly belong to us. Here I am, Sybil, if you want me.

For once the graceful languor of Sybil Langley's manner had deserted her, and she came almost hurriedly into the apartment.

"Duke," she said, hastily, coming up to him, "what is this that mamma tells me—that all our property is gone—that we are ruined? oh, Duke, is it true?"

Duke looked down at her with misty eyes.

"My poor Sybil!" he said, tenderly, "it is too true."

"*All* gone?" her white lips whispered. "Nothing left, Duke?"

"Nothing but our house in town and the furniture. We can sell both, and probably there will be a small sum saved from the wreck, when things are settled—a little income for mamma, I hope, but certainly nothing for you or me, dear."

Sybil burst into a passion of tears and sobs.

"I won't believe it!" she gasped, incredulously. "It isn't—it can't be true! It's just a tale that you are making up, to frighten me—I know it is!"

"Hush, dear!" said the young man, gently. "Do not give way like this. We must try and bear it bravely. At the worst, we have each other left."

But that, alas! was small consolation to poor Sybil.

She wept still more passionately for some time, heedless of her brother's soothing words and caresses.

She looked up at last with a sudden flash of hope.

"Duke," she began eagerly, "Lord Aylesmere knows nothing of this, and you will not tell him, will you? Don't breathe a syllable of it to him, Duke; whatever you do!"

"I am not very likely to mention it, unless he does. But why is it to be kept a secret from Lord Aylesmere, of all people? He will certainly know it soon."

"Yes, but not for a day or two, if you don't tell him. I wouldn't, for the world, have it get to his ears for a day or two! If it does, my chance of being Countess of Aylesmere will be gone for ever; for, of course, however he may like me, he will not think of proposing to a girl without a penny."

"I thought," said Duke, in a grave, slow tone, "I thought you said you did not mean to marry Lord Aylesmere, Sybil?"

"Not then—I didn't then—but now, Duke, what am I to do? It would kill me to have to go out in the world to get my own living."

"I hope there will be no necessity for that, Sybil," Duke interposed quickly; "I hope to be able to earn enough for you, as well as for myself."

"Yes, but it would be so different to what I have been used to," protested Sybil. "You will be poor, Duke; and I should have to do without things that I have always had, and—and—oh! I couldn't bear it—I know I couldn't!" cried Sybil.

"Am I to understand, then, Sybil, that you wish Lord Aylesmere, in the belief that you will have a considerable fortune, to make you an offer of marriage, which, on discovering the real state of the case, he may—probably will—regret?"

"You needn't put it so harshly," pouted Sybil.

"I beg your pardon! I thought I had 'put it' very moderately. But that is what you mean?"

"Ye-es."

"It does not occur to you, that Lord Aylesmere, on

discovering the deception, may even then withdraw from the engagement?"

"No, he wouldn't," answered Sybil, quickly, "he is too honourable. Besides, Duke, he really likes me; and once engaged to me, he would soon forgive the deception."

"I doubt it!" and Duke shook his head. "Besides, there is another trifling objection to your marriage with Lord Aylesmere; he might possibly disapprove of a certain tender little scene that took place in the wood the other day."

"Duke!" Sybil fell down on her knees before him with a scream of dismay, "you surely will not tell him *that*! Oh, Duke, you will not! You cannot be so hard, so cruel!"

"So just, rather!" interpolated Duke.

"No, unjust—terribly unjust and cruel!" said Sybil, vehemently. "Why need you take up that against me? A piece of folly it was, I grant; but there was no harm in it. I couldn't help myself!"

"Perhaps you can induce Lord Aylesmere to think so."

"I couldn't—you know I couldn't!" cried Sybil, with an hysterical sob. "You know what his strict, stern notions are; and yet you can think of telling him that—of ruining my prospects for life! Oh, Duke! say you will not tell him!"

Duke thought a moment, Sybil eagerly watching his face.

"No," he said, gravely, "I will not tell him that; on consideration, I feel I should be too much ashamed. But"—and the expression of his face checked Sybil's hasty thanks—"that you have lost your fortune, I as certainly will tell him. If Lord Aylesmere chooses to wed my sister, he may do it; but he will do it with his eyes open. It is of no use trying to alter my decision, Sybil; you will find me immovable."

And though Sybil wasted a quarter of an hour's breath in passionate entreaties, it was to no purpose. Convinced at last that Duke was not to be moved from his purpose, Sybil collapsed into a fit of "the

sulks ;” and Duke turned away with a weary sigh, inexpressibly pained at this fresh insight into his sister’s character.

Sybil came out of her ill-humour when he was gone ; for what is the use of wasting sour looks upon the desert air, or sulking when there is nobody by to care for it, or be aggravated thereby ?

“ You shall not have the telling of it, *mon frère*,” she muttered, rising, and flinging herself out of the room ; “ I will relieve you of that pleasing responsibility—if he is to know, I will be first in the field ! ”

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### ANGLING FOR AN OFFER.

So it came to pass that Lord Aylesmere, after a morning’s successful fishing, loitering through the shrubberies on his way to the house, surprised Miss Langley in a most effective morning toilette and a deluge of tears. She appeared to have been industriously inclined when overtaken by this storm of grief ; for a piece of canvas, glowing with a half-finished wreath of roses and lilies, lay at her feet, and her lap was filled with bright-coloured wools. The young lady, of course, could not have been aware of Lord Aylesmere’s approach, for her face was buried in her hands, and the tears raining through her fingers fell in glittering drops on the brilliant skeins in her lap.

Shocked, startled, surprised, in a moment his lordship was beside her, earnestly entreating her to tell him the cause of her agitation.

Tears falling faster than ever, with an occasional sob to relieve the monotony, and Sybil ventures a furtive glance through her fingers at Lord Aylesmere’s face, to note the effect.

"Miss Langley! Sybil! my own darling! what is it?" pleads his lordship.

"My own darling," her voice broken with sobs, at last consents to explain, and listens, with a mournful smile, to Lord Aylesmere's attempts at consolation.

"Ah! you do not know," she sighs, "what a weak, faint-hearted, foolish girl I am! I cannot help shrinking from the thought of being thrown upon the cold, cold, heartless world, that always frowns upon those who most need its kindness; it seems such a dreadful thing to have to buffet against adverse fortune! But"—with meek resignation—"I must try and bear it with fortitude. It will be easier to bear soon, perhaps; but just now it seems very hard!" and again the bright drops fringe the long black lashes; but as the wools are already saturated, and her semi-transparent black and lavender skirts are composed of a material which wrinkles on exposure to salt-water, they come no farther.

What can Lord Aylesmere do—what could any man do, as much in love as he—but offer the sorrowing beauty the shelter and protection of his love on the spot? Besides, the loss of fortune to the girl he loves is nothing to this grave, noble gentleman. It is the gem which has won his heart, not its setting—that he can replace with one infinitely richer, and more worthy of its unparalleled beauty. Poor deluded lover! never dreaming that this, to him, priceless jewel is, in reality, nothing but a bit of common paste! And by how many is that delusion shared! How many of us are at this moment proudly wearing some glittering bauble, which we alone, of all the world, know not is a counterfeit! Happy for us if we never wake to a knowledge of its worthlessness—if we go down to the grave believing and rejoicing in its priceless value!

And now this proud, grave nobleman waits, with his heart throbbing painfully beneath his velveteen morning coat—waits, as once before in his life he waited, for the words which are as life or death to him.

Does no memory of that other wooing come back to



him now? that other time when, rich in youth and health, he stood, with the golden laburnam tassels brushing his forehead, watching the fleeting blushes chase each other over a fair young face, even as now he watches that of the brilliant brunette before him?

Oh wife! whose golden head calmly rests in the quiet graveyard, is there no power in the love you once bore him, that your spirit-wings hover not near him, and your spirit-voice whispers in his ear no warning of the pitfall that awaits his feet?

"Sybil, I am waiting!" he says, hoarsely, for Sybil is silent for some moments after he ceases speaking. "Ah! I see I am too old, too grave, to win the love of a young girl like you—I might have known that you could not love me!" and his lordship is turning regretfully away.

One swift glance at his face, and then Sybil's eyes fall again, as if with unspeakable confusion. But there is just enough encouragement in that glance to make his lordship seat himself beside her.

"Sybil, is it possible that—that you do love me?"

"Ye-e-s, I—I—love you," falters Sybil, apparently in an extremity of maidenly shyness; "but——"

"But what, darling?" asks Lord Aylesmere, enraptured at this confession.

"But I am afraid that I ought not to say so—I can't bear the thought of coming to you penniless, as I am now. And then, I am afraid that you will regret your choice—I am so young and foolish, and you are——"

"So old and stern."

"No; but so good and wise," corrects Sybil, with a glance of childlike trust and confidence.

Finally, however, Lord Aylesmere succeeds in overcoming the young lady's objections, and in extracting from her rosy lips a faintly whispered "Yes," in answer to his oft-repeated question if she will be his wife.

And then, having surrendered to his lordship's keeping one cool, firm white hand—a rather large hand it is, but a very beautiful one—Sybil thinks she might, with advantage, do a little bit of disinterestedness.

"How selfish I am!" she says, with a charming blush; "and how very wrong it is of me to be so happy, when poor mamma and Duke are in such trouble! You must not think of taking me away from them for a long time—they will want me to help comfort them."

But on his lordship's representing to her that he wants her more than they can possibly do, and that, under existing circumstances, the less their marriage is delayed, the better it will be for all, Sybil at last waives her scruples, and graciously consents to become Lady Aylesmere at the end of three weeks.

Having arrived at which satisfactory conclusion, Lord Aylesmere—not being a demonstrative man, even when his feelings are most deeply stirred—contents himself with pressing a fervent kiss upon the calm, untrembling hand that lies in his; and Sybil, concealing a yawn behind her handkerchief, presently proposes that they shall go in-doors, where Miss Langley's first care is to ascertain if her dress has sustained any damage from the briny shower.

Miss Langley behaves with unexceptionable propriety the whole of the evening. She will not even indulge in the faintest suspicion of a flirtation with "Cousin Tom," but coolly ignores that young gentleman's existence, and is apparently quite unconscious that he is fuming with rage and disappointment, and sits, sulkily silent, in a distant corner—wherefrom come withering glances, so scorchingly fiery that one almost expects to see the fragile leaves and delicate waxen blossoms of a hothouse plant on a bracket near by curl up and crackle beneath their influence.

"Well, I hope you're enjoying yourself!" says Belle, considerately, stopping before him, as she makes a tour of the room, leaning on Sir Henry Glenmergen's arm. "You look quite in harmony with this 'festive scene,' I must say. One would think you were a ticket-of-leave bear from the Zoo! It's my opinion, if some enterprising individual were to clap you in a cage, and exhibit you about the country, you would prove quite a paying concern!"

An inarticulate growl from under Tom's moustache

—and he is heard to mutter something about its being nobody's business but his own, if he chose to put himself into a tub.

"Certainly not," returns Belle, with unruffled equanimity; "only, when you go into the tub business, I hope you'll get one with a cover, so as to hide that disconsolate-looking face of yours from the ken of civilised people—I declare it's too much for my nerves!"

"Cover him down, and label him 'Best Old Tom,'" supplemented Sir Henry, chuckling at his own wit.

Tom shows all his white teeth in a savage sort of smile, and glares ferociously at him, and this time the growl forms itself into something very like an intimation that somebody will get his head punched, if said "somebody" doesn't mind his own business.

"Miss Langley looks radiant, and well she may," observes Sir Henry, meditatively, after a pause, during which he has been taking a quiet survey of the room through his eye-glass. "It's a brilliant match for her—coronets aren't picked up every day, you know."

"What do you mean?" asks Tom, his face blanching.

"Mean? Why, my dear fellow, haven't you heard that Miss Langley is engaged to Lord Aylesmere? What have you done with your ears all the evening?"

"It's a lie!" roars Tom, springing to his feet, and looking so white and fierce that Sir Henry involuntarily shrinks back. "You base hound! Dare to utter such a falsehood again, and I will choke the breath out of your miserable body!"

Sir Henry retreats a few paces, and stares at him as if he doubts his sanity.

"My poor Tom! it is true," says Belle, laying her hand on his arm, and speaking with unwonted gentleness.

Shaking off her hand as if it had stung him, Tom looked at her an instant—a dazed, bewildered look—and then, clutching with one hand at his necktie, sprang to one of the windows, and rushed out into the night.

For a long time he wandered with restless, aimless hurry about the park, then, obeying a sudden impulse, he retraced his steps, and stood on the terrace before the open lighted windows of the drawing-room. The sound of music and laughter floated out to him as he stood there, sullen and miserable, but he heeded it not.

At last a dark shadow intercepted one of the broad bands of light streaming from the windows; the lace curtains were put aside, and Sybil Langley stepped out upon the terrace. With one spring he was beside her; his hand fell heavily, roughly, upon her shoulder, and his hoarse voice whispered in her ear—

“Ah! here you are! It is time you and I had an understanding. Come!”

Sybil had turned to him with a scream upon her lips, but checked it on recognising him, wild and fierce as he looked, with the light streaming upon his bare head and pale, haggard face.

He laughed, a low, hoarse laugh, as she made a vain effort to throw off his heavy clasp, and dragged her along the terrace to the dim obscurity beyond those great squares of light.

“Now,” he said, grimly, releasing her, “what have you to say to me?”

“Nothing,” Sybil answered, coolly, shaking out the folds of her rich lavender *crêpe*, “except that I think you might have chosen a more gentlemanly manner of obtaining an interview. No, I have nothing to say to you. If you have anything to say to me, say on, please; and be quick—Lord Aylesmere will be looking for me presently.”

The mention of that name brought Tom’s seething passion up to boiling point, and he poured out a storm of invective, upbraiding her for her treachery to him, and invoking bitter curses upon her, if she dared to become the bride of another. “And now,” he said again, pausing for breath,—“now, what have you to say to me?”

During the delivery of this harangue Sybil had been leaning against the marble balustrade, carelessly re-

arranging the flowers of her bouquet. She looked up at this question with slightly raised eyebrows.

"Did you mean that rhapsody for me?" she said, her cold, equable tones contrasting strangely with the heat and passion of his. "Really, I thought you were rehearsing a scene from a fifth-rate melodrama! I was just going to congratulate you upon your acting."

"Acting!"—Tom glared murderously at an unoffending laurel—"it is you who are acting, cold-hearted marble that you are! you can stand there and calmly look upon the ruin you have wrought. It is nothing to you that you have wrecked my happiness for ever! you do not care for that, do you?"

"I am not responsible for any such 'wreck' and 'ruin.' Dear me, this rose is shattered—what a pity!"

Tom snatched at the bouquet, and sent it flying across into the branches of a tree.

"Yes, you are—you are!" he retorted, grinding his teeth with fury. "To you I owe it all—to you, with your pretty face and winning ways! False-hearted syren! do you think——"

"I think that you are extremely foolish," interrupted Sybil, placidly. "If you mistook mere friendly feeling for a warmer sentiment, you only are to blame for your folly. Pray don't cut that beautiful rose-bush to pieces!"—for Tom was slashing away savagely with his broad-bladed pocket-knife at a flourishing little monthly rose-tree.

He turned upon her fiercely.

"If I don't, I shall kill you!" he said, vengefully. "I tell you I am dangerous!"

"Such a display of temper is not calculated to make me regret my decision," observed Sybil, coldly; and Tom flamed up again.

"Temper! Do you think I am as cold-hearted as you are? Do you think I have no feeling—that I do not care for—oh, Sybil, I wish I didn't!" and, his mood suddenly changing, the poor weak young fellow broke down, and, hiding his face in his hands, actually sobbed aloud, uttering broken sentences of alternate entreaty and despair.

"This is growing wearisome," said Sybil, contemptuously; and, turning away with a scornful smile, she swept back along the terrace and re-entered the drawing-room, feeling pretty sure that she had nothing to fear from Mr. Tom's rage. Nor had she.

One other rejected lover there was within the walls of Thornton that night; but he met his fate in a very different manner. Sad and dejected he was, but there was no trace of anger in his heart against the author of his unhappiness.

One glance at Stella's face told Vladimir what her answer would be. "Don't, don't say it," he said, putting out his hand as if to ward off a blow; "I know what it is—and I know it would be different if you could!"

"Oh, I am so sorry!" faltered Stella, feeling more grieved than ever she had done in all her young life.

"I know you are," he said gently; "and I know, too, that I am not worthy of you, that——"

"Oh, do not say that!" cried Stella, eagerly. "If you only knew how weak and worthless I am, you would never have done me the honour you have! What will you say to me," she went on, looking away from him, anxious only to lessen the pain she was inflicting by lowering herself in his esteem, "when I tell you that last night, for a little while, I felt like saying yes—just because of your wealth and position?"

Vladimir smiled sadly.

"But you did not do it," he said. "And, Stella, do not think I blame you for what has occurred. If you regret the past, remember that, painful as is the waking from that bright dream, I would not have it different—the dream, I mean, not the ending. Remember too," he added, as if he had thought of, and wanted to banish for her, every source of self-reproach, "that I would not have had you come to me, unless you came with your whole heart. Now, good-bye!"

"You are going away?" said Stella, the hot tears filling her eyes, as she placed her hand in the one he extended.

"Yes," he answered, gravely; "I am going away—for ever, unless—unless the time ever comes when I can greet you again as a friend. Farewell!" One close, earnest hand-clasp, and the next instant Stella was alone.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE ANGEL OF DEATH.

THE legal formalities necessary to give Edward Langley possession of his inheritance were speedily gone through, and the fair estate of Helstone passed away from Duke, leaving him a much poorer man than it had found him. It was found, when affairs were settled, that there would be an income of a hundred and fifty pounds a year still left for Mrs. Langley, and she intended to rent a charming little cottage in a pretty country town, just near enough to the great city for Duke to run down to spend his Sundays with her. Lord Aylesmere had offered her the dower house at Weyburn—having peculiar notions respecting the advisability of married people living apart from relatives on either side, he did not offer her a home under his own roof; but Mrs. Langley preferred independence, and prepared, though with many misgivings, to live in her little nutshell of a villa, with only two servants, no lady's maid, and no carriage—in genteel poverty.

"You needn't expect to enlist Stella's sympathy, mother," Duke said, laughingly, one day, when his mother had been imparting a few of her "misgivings" to Stella. "Her face is a living reproach to you. Genteel poverty! she thinks a hundred and fifty pounds a year an immensity of wealth, and wonders how anybody could possibly spend it."

"It seems to me like very genteel poverty indeed," said Stella, colouring. "But that is because I don't understand the real value of money, I daresay."

And Stella really did wonder how anybody could talk of poverty and a hundred and fifty pounds per annum in the same breath. Knowing poverty as she had known it, she knew, too, how far the possessor of such a sum as that is placed above the fear of contact with its hard, grinding surface.

An old medical friend of Duke's offered him, for a merely nominal sum, the good-will of a small London practice which, having just come into possession of a handsome fortune, he was about to resign. A very small one it was, and in a poor locality; but, believing that it could be enlarged and improved, Duke determined to take it, as a beginning, till he could find something better.

The first week in September Stella and Miss Jesson turned their backs on Castle Thornton, and set their faces Cleightonwards. Before they left, Lady Thornton offered Stella an engagement as companion to Maude, with a liberal salary; but Stella, feeling that the situation was "got up" purposely for her benefit, gratefully but firmly declined it.

A strong staff of bricklayers and carpenters had been at work at Sylvester Hall during the holidays, repairing the damage occasioned by the fire and its usual accompaniments—smoke and water; and it had about it now an unpleasantly suggestive air of new wood and fresh paint.

"How miserably hot and poky and stuffy it seems after Thornton, doesn't it?" said Stella, the evening of their return.

"What a discontented face!" remarked Miss Jesson. "And why does Sylvester Hall deserve such a shower of adjectives now, any more than it did before Thornton? Has it shrunk up at all through the alterations?"

"It seems to have done so," said Stella, her face changing to a smile. "It's the force of contrast, I suppose. But I hope you don't mean to insinuate that there isn't a contrast between the large, pleasant, airy rooms at Thornton and this."

"Three more adjectives!" said Miss Jesson, placidly.



"No, dear; and the contrast is not only in the size of the rooms. I have felt it painfully too; but I think 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.'"

"I think it is high time I left Thornton," observed Stella, after a moment's musing on those words; "I believe I was getting spoiled. I don't believe, either," she added, wistfully, "that the journey has done you a bit of good—and I hoped so much from the change."

"And I," said Miss Jesson, musingly, "hope so much from another change which I shall have shortly."

"Another change! Why, where are you going, Alice?"

The smile which met her wondering eyes answered her; and with a low wail of exceeding sorrow Stella sank down and hid her face in her friend's lap.

"Such a glad, happy change, dear!" Miss Jesson went on, peacefully, though her voice shook just a little in sympathy, and her fingers passed caressingly over the bowed head; "and it is coming very soon. Can't you try and be glad for me, dear?"

Glad for her! Yes, that Stella could be, and was; but for herself—what awful desolation was coming! It was impossible to stay the tears for a time; but presently Stella made up her mind that it would not do to give way in this fashion. She must be calm for her friend's sake; and so she forced herself to look up again, and to speak cheerfully.

It was quite evident next day that Miss Jesson was unfit to fulfil the duties of her position; and it was evident too, from Madame's troubled glances at her, that she thought so, and was seriously debating the propriety of getting somebody else to fill the place of the English governess.

Those glances, which Stella plainly read, decided her upon her course of action. As soon as lessons were over for the day, she sought Madame in her own private sanctum; and left it half an hour afterwards, engaged as English governess in her friend's place, and with the understanding that she was also to give

lessons in French and Italian to the younger pupils,—these additional lessons being thrown in as a kind of make-weight, in consideration of the extra expense of board and lodging for two young girls instead of one. For Alice was not to be thrust out into the cold—no, indeed! Nor was she to receive the slightest hint that her services were not worth the salary which Madame was to continue to pay to her—Stella herself receiving no pecuniary recompense. Madame had strongly protested against the last clause of the bargain, but Stella contrived to get her own way at last; and with a very satisfied face she left the august presence of Madame, and going straight to Miss Jesson, informed her that, as she did not seem very strong, Madame had consented to allow her (Stella) to assist her a little, till she procured an engagement.

And so, under pretence of assisting her a little, Stella managed to leave Miss Jesson very little to do.

Perhaps it was quite as well for Stella that her time was so fully occupied—she had none to spare for vain regrets and useless repinings. That happy time at Thornton seemed like a far-away dream. Once or twice it came across her with a quick, sharp pang, that, if she had accepted Vladimir, she might have taken Alice away to some pleasant sunny clime, and surrounded her with the luxuries which would, perhaps, have supported her failing strength; but a few minutes' talk with Alice always set that feeling right.

After the first few days Alice failed rapidly. Though she persisted in getting up and “keeping about,” as Margaret the cook expressed it, she was able to do very little else but sit still in a softly cushioned easy-chair.

Every expedient that Stella's loving care could suggest to alleviate the weariness and pain of her illness was adopted; every delicacy likely to tempt a dainty appetite procured, and every spare moment that Stella had was devoted to the task of nursing and amusing her. In vain—the Death-angel had marked Alice Jesson for his own, and no care, however tender and

affectionate, could erase the seal which he had stamped upon her fair young face.

The invalid had a few pounds in the bank, saved out of her salary, and laid by for just such a time as this. She drew it out now, and placed it in Stella's hands, for the expenses of her illness, and Stella, however she might grieve at the necessity, was compelled to take it, for funds of her own she had none.

One bright, mild afternoon in September, Miss Jesson was sitting by the open window of her room, watching the wind whirling the fallen leaves along the garden walk, when Stella came in with a small basket of fruit—great luscious, juicy-looking grapes, purple and white, and large velvety-cheeked peaches, nestling temptingly among cool green leaves.

"See here," she said, depositing her dainty burden upon the window-ledge; "Herr Wilstein brought me these when he came to give me my painting lesson—as if I wanted grapes and peaches! By the bye, I never can imagine what that kind old man saw in that sketch of mine to induce him to ride over here twice a week on purpose to give me lessons. He says if I keep on improving as I have done, I shall be able to do something worth exhibiting soon. Isn't it strange that I meet with so many kind friends?"

"It is fortunate that he happened to be coming for a long visit so near Cleighton," said Miss Jesson, "and that the days which suit him best are our Wednesday and Saturday half-holidays."

"Very. Now, dear Alice, just give me your opinion of the flavour of those peaches. There, try that one. Isn't it a beauty? It really seems almost a shame to eat it."

The peach was duly eaten and praised, and then Miss Jesson's hands fell listlessly upon her lap again, and the far-away, musing look came back to her eyes.

"Don't you feel so well to-day, Alice?" asked Stella, suddenly, watching the early autumn breeze lifting the golden fringe from her white, blue-veined temples.

"Quite as well, dear; and so happy—I feel just as

if Willie were somewhere very near me. Indeed, the impression is so strong, that I think I should scarcely feel surprised if the door opened, and he came into the room this moment. It must be because I am drawing very near the spirit-world—so near that I can almost hold communion with its inhabitants.”

Stella thought, with quick dread, that the face at which she was looking seemed almost that of a spirit in its ethereal purity, and that they might well be spirit-eyes—those rapt blue orbs, looking into her own.

She had got used now to the idea of Alice's departure; they talked of it—those two—as they might have talked of a pleasant journey which she was about to take; Alice spoke of it as a weary traveller speaks of his anticipated home-coming. She was going home, she said—home to her Father's house; and she was assured of a loving welcome—what had she to fear? The path she had to tread might look dark to others, but for her it was radiant with an eternal sunlight.

The door opened, and Margaret, putting her head in, beckoned mysteriously to Stella, who went out and closed the door.

“There's a gentleman out here wants to see Miss Jesson,” said Margaret, in a rapid whisper; “so I thought I had better call you.”

“Wants to see Miss Jesson! Where is he, Margaret?”

“In the reception-room.”

Stella went forward mechanically. A gentleman—tall, bronzed, bearded, and dressed in the uniform of a naval officer—stood before her. Instinctively she knew him.

“You are Willie Macpherson,” she said, without the faintest shadow of a doubt. “You are just in time!”

“Is she so ill?” he asked, tremulously. “Can I see her?”

“I will see—I must prepare her;” and Stella turned back to the sick room.

Even in those few seconds Miss Jesson's face seemed to have changed and sharpened.

"I know, dear," she said, quietly, as Stella opened the door; "it is Willie. Let him come in."

Stella brought the tall bronzed figure, and ushered him into the room; and then, softly closing the door upon them, she turned away to her own room, and yielded to the grief to which she dared not give way in the presence of the invalid.

A wild, hurried clanging of the bell startled her, and sent her with a throbbing heart back to the room in which she left the lovers. One glance at the white face lying on Willie Macpherson's arm, and Stella's eyes turned to him in an agony of fear.

"She is not—not——"

"She is gone!" answered his pallid, shaking lips.

Not quite—the vigorous remedies they instantly applied stayed the departing spirit for one brief moment. The white eyelids quivered open; the dim blue eyes gave them each one last look of intense affection, and the faint voice feebly gasped,—

"Don't grieve for me, darlings; I am nearly home!" and the gentle, patient spirit had winged its way to the presence of its Maker.

The grief of that strong man was terrible to witness. Bravely struggling to put aside her own sorrow, Stella tried to comfort the stricken lover. She told him of the dead girl's patient, loving life; and how she had mourned him, thinking him among the dead, while he had been wrecked on a savage coast, and had been tended by the hands of savages through a long and tedious illness, from which he had recovered, and returned only just in time for that last precious interview, whose sweetness was dashed with such inexpressible pain.

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The September twilight is creeping over the green country churchyard, softly touching a strong, stalwart figure kneeling, in a wild abandonment of grief, beside a new-made grave, shaking with short, heavy sobs. Leaning against the fresh white marble headstone—which bears, in deeply cut black letters, the simple inscription. "In memory of Alice Jesson, aged 21,

‘In sure and certain hope of a joyful resurrection’—with hot tears raining down her face, is a slight girlish figure.

Presently the young man rises and comes towards the girl.

“Heaven bless you!” he utters, in a choked voice, taking both her hands in his. “I know something of what you have been to her; she—she told me that! Again and again, Heaven bless you! Good-bye!” And the white stricken face passes away through the tender autumn dusk from the grave of his dead love.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### WHAT MRS. MASON THINKS OF SIR EDWARD.

“ONLY six days to Christmas,” mused Stella, standing in the shabby firelit schoolroom in the chill, wintry gloom of a December twilight.

It had been a hard, harassing day for the young teacher. She had been up since daybreak, flitting about, here and there and everywhere; superintending the packing of boxes and bags; sewing on strings and buttons, which, after the manner of strings and buttons in general, were of course missing at the last minute; muffling up little forms as warmly and snugly as possible, and kissing good-bye to happy, expectant little faces. And now the last pupil was gone “home for the holidays;” the other teachers had joyfully turned their backs upon Sylvester Hall—only Stella was left to spend her holidays there.

How bare and dreary the old schoolroom looked, with the leaping firelight vainly striving to brighten up the shabby benches and faded ink-splashed drab desks! Doubly desolate, doubly cheerless, it looked to Stella, this chill, gray afternoon, as she stood there, mentally contrasting this Christmas with the last, when Alice had been there to share the loneliness,

and there crept over her "a feeling of sadness and longing" that was very nearly "akin to pain," though Time had in some degree softened the first shock of Alice's death.

She sighed as she thought how pleasant it must be for those other girls who had gone to happy home circles and to the festivities attendant on Christmas. Merry Christmas! it had never brought much merriment to her; and she went back in fancy to all, or nearly all, the Christmases of her young life. And then her thoughts went to her mother—her poor, erring mother—and the box which she had given to her care. What secret could it have contained?

"Some crime that she had committed, she said," murmured Stella. "I am very glad that it was destroyed in the fire; I would much rather be ignorant of its nature. Poor mother! Ah me! here am I dawdling here, when I promised Margaret to help her stone those raisins."

And Stella found her way through the dusky passage to the warm, light kitchen, where Margaret sat stoning raisins after a novel fashion of her own; for after cutting open the fruit, she dexterously abstracted the stones by a skilful application of her own white teeth. Standing upon the threshold, Stella watched her a few moments, and mentally abjured mince-pies and plum-pudding for that Christmas at least.

But, finding herself observed, Margaret descended to a more orthodox, if less agreeable, mode of operation, and, surreptitiously disposing of the little heap of raisin-stones which had accumulated in her mouth, welcomed Stella to her domain.

Rat-a-tat-tat! "That's the postman," said Margaret, skurrying to the door. She was gone a long while—somehow or other it always took that young postman a long time to deliver a letter at Sylvester Hall,—but returned at length with a letter, which she laid before Stella. It was from Mrs. Langley, and contained an invitation to Helstone Priory for Christmas, for Sir Edward Langley had expressed a wish to welcome under his own roof the same party, as nearly as pos-

sible; which he surprised at Thornton on his return, and had therefore commissioned his aunt to invite Stella. So ran the letter, and it said also that Duke, who could not leave London before the twenty-first, would call for her on his way down.

Then, enclosed, was a little note from Maude, enforcing the invitation in urgent terms. Stella mused over it in doubt whether she had better accept or refuse. "Accept," responded the quick throb of her heart; "Refuse," whispered that impertinent little monitor, Prudence, which always counsels one to do just what one doesn't want to do; the consequence being, that its suggestions are disregarded much more frequently than they would be if they tallied with one's inclinations. And so it was in the present case: Stella felt the step was unwise, imprudent; that it would probably unfit her for the work which she would have to take up again soon; that she was a foolish little moth, fluttering around the candle which had already singed her poor little wings; and yet—alas! our heroine was by no means as perfect as a heroine should be—she made up her mind to be ready when Duke came for her; and ready she was.

The journey to Helstone was not one of the pleasantest. Duke was no more like his old self than he had been the last part of her stay at Thornton, and she wondered at and regretted the change, inexplicable as it was to her. Duke was very kind and attentive to all her wants—perfectly polite, but he was no more. He was very grave and silent, and Stella was nervous and constrained; and altogether it was a relief to both when the train rattled into the little dimly lighted station at Helstone, and, consigning their luggage to the care of a tall footman, they transferred themselves to the luxurious carriage that was waiting for them, and were rapidly driven to Helstone Priory.

There Stella found an old friend, in the person of the housekeeper, Mrs. Mason, and the old lady soon remembered the little waif whom she had taken under her motherly wing during her three days' stay at the Langleys' town-house, six years back. Mason was as



communicative as ever, and, glad of a sympathetic listener, she welcomed Stella to her snug, pleasant room, and poured out her regrets at the sudden reverse of fortune that had overtaken "our branch of the family," and hinted her disapproval of some of "Sir Edward's doings."

"Not that *I've* any reason to complain of him, you know, Miss. But still, I don't think it was a wise step for him to turn away all the old faithful servants, and fill the house with fresh ones. Of course a gentleman has a right to do as he pleases, but I should have thought he'd have liked to keep those that had known him from boyhood, instead of having a lot of new people about him that couldn't know anything about his ways."

"One would think so, certainly," assented Stella. "Were you here when Sir Edward returned, Mrs. Mason?"

"Why, yes, Miss. You see, the old housekeeper at Helstone died just as Mr. Duke came in for the property, and of course he put me here in her place. But I don't think Sir Edward knew what to do about keeping me; only Mr. Duke wrote to him and begged him to do so; so, after hesitating a good while, he said at last, 'Ah, well, I don't know that it matters; keep your situation, Mrs. Mason.'"

"He decided wisely, I am sure, Mrs. Mason," said Stella, impelled, she hardly knew why, to keep up the conversation. "Did you know much of Sir Edward before he went abroad?"

"Well, you know, Miss, of course I didn't know a great deal of him, being housekeeper to the other branch of the family; I only saw him when he came to our house visiting. But some of the old tenants that remember him before he went away say he's altered strangely. You see, Miss, I'm afraid he's done himself harm in the neighbourhood by making such a clean sweep of the old servants—folks notice such things so much—and he isn't half so easy-tempered as he used to be, they say. And not only that, but

he's changed his religion—gone over to the Roman Catholics."

"A Romanist!"

"Yes; he's had an orry—horror—something——"

"An oratory?" suggested Stella.

"Yes, Miss, that's it—an oratory, with a crucifix, and all the rest of it, fixed up in a little room that leads out of his bedroom; and the folks round here are such staunch Protestants, they can't abide anything that's the least High Church—so of course that goes against him too."

No, Sir Edward Langley was not a popular man in the county. People did not know exactly what they disliked in him; and, indeed, except the fact of his being a pervert to the Catholic faith, there seemed to be no ground for dislike. He did his best to stand well with the county families and to gain their good opinion. He was no recluse; he gave *récherché* dinners to the elder, and snug little bachelor-parties to the younger gentlemen, and broadly hinted to the mammas and daughters of his intention to give a grand ball at the new year; and the old gentlemen drank his port and sherry, and helped eat his dinners; and the young ones drank his champagne, and smoked his choice cigars—loudly voting him a "jolly fellow" the while; and then, old and young alike, went home, and decided that there was something in him that they "couldn't take to for the life of them—seems something—aw—mysterious about the fellow, you know, as if he'd—aw—done something that wasn't just the thing, and was afraid of being found out."

The old warm friendship between Sir Edward and Duke seemed almost to have died out. Try as he would, the latter could not feel towards his cousin exactly as he had done in the olden time, and Sir Edward seemed to have no desire to resuscitate the old state of affairs. He was changeable and varying in his moods; sometimes restlessly gay; at others, gloomy and irritable—very much changed for the worse, even his best friends agreed.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN WHICH JOHN CADBURN COMES TO LIGHT IN SOME  
DARK BUSINESS.

"MAKE haste and get ready, Stella; we're going to help the Vicar's girls with the church decorations," said Belle, coming into Stella's room the morning after her arrival.

"Up at this time!" exclaimed Stella, opening her sleepy eyes. "I never expected to see Belle Ashleigh putting in a claim for the 'early worm,' but you are fairly entitled to it this morning."

"That I am," agreed Belle, promptly; "and I'd go out and try to scratch up my prize, only there's about eleven and three-quarter inches of snow on the ground, and I don't think the very earliest wriggler extant would compensate me for a red nose and chilblains on the tips of my fingers. But you had better imitate my brilliant example—we'll cry halves in the worm, if that's any inducement—because we're to have an early breakfast, so as to have a nice long morning at our floral task. Now, shut your eyes again at your peril!"

The pretty little church rang with merry voices and laughter. The little army of decorators was scattered about in battalions composed of both sexes; the many dexterously carrying on at the same time the rival occupations of flirting and manipulating the glossy leaves of the evergreens and glowing scarlet holly-berries into manifold shapes; and the few, with busy fingers, were putting the finishing touches to wreaths and crosses and festoons. A little group stood at the foot of the pulpit-steps, noting the effect of a motto they had just put up.

"Seems to me it doesn't hang just straight," criticised Belle. "Here, you, Stella, come and—Gracious me! who's that coming up the aisle with Sir Edward? If it isn't one of our Cleighton friends—John Cadburn, as sure as I'm a living sinner!"

Duke's eyes flashed a quick look of inquiry at Stella's dismayed face. He heard the words, uttered under her breath, "John Cadburn here!" and he noted that when John Cadburn came up, Stella was very busy among a huge mass of evergreens, and that when Belle turned to look for her, Stella had vanished.

She had heard Sir Edward Langley introduce him to his friends, as a young lawyer, living at Helstone, who occasionally did a little business for him; and she slipped away to the other end of the church, heartily wishing herself back again at Cleighton; for it would be very unpleasant to be compelled to run against John Cadburn at every turn during her visit; and of course, if Sir Edward chose to patronise and associate with him, it would be impossible for her to avoid him.

She was sitting in her room, before the dressing-bell rang, seriously considering the feasibility of taking the next train back to Cleighton, when Belle entered the room.

"Our legal friend is coming to dinner," she announced. "I heard Sir Edward ask him. By the bye, it's rather odd that he should set up business in Helstone, isn't it?"

"No more than that he should set up in any other place," said Stella, absently.

"That's the worst of flirting," observed Belle, meditatively; "one never knows where, and under what circumstances, one's old flames are going to turn up. It's awfully awkward! But you needn't trouble yourself about this young fellow—I'll take him in hand. I shall get up an overpowering toilette, and then go downstairs and open the campaign. He isn't used to good society, and it won't take much to turn his head. Get yourself up *à la grande dame*, will you? and we'll have some fun. It'll be quite refreshing—I haven't had a flirtation for a good while."

Having made up her mind to the inevitable, Stella descended to the drawing-room, calm, dignified, and self-possessed. A slight bow, frigidly polite, acknowledged her introduction to her quondam lover. But

she made no movement to take the young man's proffered hand, and, without replying to his stammered words, swept on, calm and cold, to a seat at the other end of the apartment, unconscious that a manner so different to her usual genial courtesy had attracted the attention of other eyes than Duke's. He, she felt—and it wounded her to the quick—was watching her with a new, strange suspicion in his eyes.

Stella wondered afresh that night how she could ever even have tolerated John Cadburn. It was evident, as Belle had said, that he was unaccustomed to the tone of good society, and, awkwardly constrained and ill at ease, he appeared at a great disadvantage among the elegant, well-bred men and women who graced the handsomely appointed rooms.

Belle, however, was as good as her word. She took him under her wing, and he, after several furtive glances at Stella, who was engaged in an animated conversation with a distinguished M.P., rushed headlong into a ridiculously violent flirtation with the rattle-pated beauty, rendering both so conspicuous thereby, that, instead of drawing him on, Belle found herself actually trying to check the stream of his apparent devotion.

"Well, I didn't think he was quite such a flat!" commented Belle, taking up her bedroom candlestick, when he was gone.

The object of her not very complimentary remark, with steps none too steady—he had taken quite enough wine after dinner—pursued the tenor of his way through the park into the town of Helstone. Stopping before a door in the principal street, duly brass-plated and labelled "J. Cadburn, Solicitor," he inserted a latch-key into the lock, and let himself into the house. The passage was dark and silent, but a faint spot of light glimmered through the keyhole of a door in the middle of it. Opening this, the young lawyer found himself in a cosy little apartment, half office, half sitting-room, dimly lighted by a single gas-jet, turned down so low as to look like a luminous bead.

With a quick, savage gesture, the young man turned it on till it hissed, and sputtered, and leaped like a mad thing; then, sullenly flinging himself upon a chair, gazed frowningly into the fire, which had nearly burned itself out, spreading out his hands over the embers to catch the warmth.

"Confound her pride and insolence!" he muttered. "She could hardly treat a dog more scornfully. Looked like a born princess, too, she did! How I wish——"

But whatever John Cadburn wished, judging from his lowering brow, it would have been small gain to Stella had some convenient fay just then appeared with the power of granting his wish.

For some time he sat there musing, his face every instant growing darker; then, turning with an air of sudden resolution, he unlocked a drawer in the table, and drew out a small tin box. He turned it over two or three times irresolutely before he attempted to open it; but at last, with an impatient "Pshaw! what have I to do with such scruples?" he produced his broad-bladed pocket-knife, and vigorously set to work to get at its contents.

They were exposed to view at last; and a prolonged whistle broke from the young lawyer's lips as he turned out upon the table a gold sleeve-fastening for a child's dress, a small locket, attached to a chain of peculiar workmanship, a pair of exquisitely embroidered socks, marked V. T., a little muslin frock, of such fine and delicate texture that it was rolled into almost as little compass as the socks, and several sheets of closely written paper, tightly folded in the bottom of the box.

He examined the articles curiously, and making nothing of them, applied himself to the task of deciphering the MS. His brow knitted ominously as he read, but it cleared a little as, having finished its perusal, and carefully replaced it, he ignited the wick of a bedroom candle which stood near him.

"At least I have a hold on her now!" he said, with a harsh laugh, and betook himself to his couch.

Stella saw no more of her former lover until Christ-

mas Eve. She was returning from a solitary walk in the park, when John Cadburn appeared right in her path, like a silent spectre, amid the gray twilight shadows that were fast creeping over the white, wintry landscape.

She had been walking briskly, and the crisp, keen air had brought a deep tinge to her usually colourless cheeks. The colour did not fade, but her face seemed, somehow, to freeze beneath it, as she recognised the unexpected apparition. The young man saw the change, and it angered him.

"You needn't look as if a venomous snake had crossed your path," he said, resentfully. "I want a few minutes' conversation with you, Stella."

"You can have nothing to say to me that I care to hear," said, Stella, icily, quickening her steps as she spoke. "It is very near dinner-time—the dressing bell will ring immediately, and I shall be late. Allow me to wish you good evening."

But John Cadburn kept pace with the little boots that pattered so swiftly over the crisp, crackling snow.

"I don't know about that," he said, moodily. "At any rate, if I'm not mistaken, you will feel interested in what I am going to say."

"As I have said, that is impossible," was the cold response.

"Well, whether or no, you will have to hear it."

"If that is the case, please be as brief as possible."

And John plunged at once into the business that had brought him there.

"What would you say"—with a furtive, sidelong glance at her face—"if I told you that you are, in your own right, heiress to a large fortune, and that I may be the means of restoring you to your rightful position?"

"Say? Probably that you had been dreaming—or drinking," replied Stella, with cool sarcasm.

"I have been doing neither," he said, with a dark, angry flush. "But what I have said is simple truth. Your mother was——"

"I know perfectly well what my mother was, thank you."

"Was a lady of rank and fortune," he went on, without heeding her scornful interruption.

"Dear me! Then I am like a princess in a fairy tale, wandering about the world in disguise! How fortunate!"

The sarcastic incredulity of her tone nettled her companion.

"Believe it or not, as you like," he said, "it is true. And, Stella, you had better reflect before you decide upon thrusting from you the wealth and position I can give you, if I choose."

"If I am, as you say, entitled to such pleasant things, there must be others besides you who are aware of it. It cannot depend entirely upon Mr. Cadburn whether I obtain this 'wealth and position.'"

"But it does," he said, eagerly. "There isn't another soul who has the faintest glimpse of the truth. I only have the proofs, and only through me can they be of any use to you."

"Proofs, you say! May I ask how you obtained proofs of such a preposterous story, if it is unknown to any human being?"

"They were easily obtained; I picked them up in your room the night of the fire. They were in a small tin——"

"A small tin box—my property!" cried Stella. "Am I to understand that you found that box—which I supposed to be destroyed in the fire—and, knowing it to be mine, not only kept it all this time, but actually opened it, and acquainted yourself with the contents? Honourable, truly! Honest and gentlemanly in the extreme!"

"I offer no excuse for that," he said. "I did not at first intend to act dishonourably in the matter—I kept it, meaning to return it when I saw you—and if I did, it was your own cold scorn that maddened me and drove me to it. But, however, let that pass; I am not here to discuss the past, but the future. Have I your sanction—you knowing what that sanction



implies—to take the necessary legal steps to reinstate you in your rightful position?”

“What the sanction implies!” repeated Stella. “Pray what does it imply?”

“It implies the ratification of the engagement even now existing between us—the fulfilment of your old promise to become my wife.”

A silence ensued—a long, significant silence.

“Do you mean that, in the event of my refusing such a condition, you will endeavour to prevent me from obtaining my rights?”

“Not only endeavour to do so, but I certainly will prevent it; if by no other means, by destroying every vestige of proof.”

“By thus elevating your moral character in my estimation you strengthen your cause wonderfully,” said Stella, ironically; then, suddenly changing her tone, she added, earnestly, “Wealth and luxury are very pleasant things, and it would be very pleasant to have them; but if they are to be accompanied by such a condition—if my possession of them depends upon my sharing them with you—then I reject them, reject them utterly and for ever!”

“That is your ultimate decision?” spoke John Cadburn’s white lips.

“That is my ultimate and only decision.”

“Stella, don’t be so foolish! Think what you are rejecting—fortune, rich and titled friends, and a love which has withstood undeserved scorn and coldness that must assuredly have killed anything of weaker growth! Besides, if I can forget the past, surely you can. And I am willing to forgive you——”

“You forgive me!” cried Stella, amazed, her clear scornful young voice ringing out over the darkening park, and her fair, cold face turned full upon him. “You forgive me! Thank you! Believe me, I appreciate such sublime condescension, such an exercise of truly Christian charity! What a conquest over self you must have achieved to enable you to utter such words! You forgive me! Well!”

With a haughty little inclination of the head, Stella

moved rapidly away from him towards the house. The young man made a quick movement, as if to follow her, but checked himself, and stood still a moment, as if in thought.

"That card is played out then," he said to himself. "But there are two others left still, and if they are not good for love, at least one is good for money, and the other for revenge. And perhaps they are only fools who prefer playing for the first."

"Only fools!" echoed a musical voice. "You are right, my friend; wise men play for the most valuable stakes. Love! bah, what is it? A mockery, a cheat, a mere delusion. Money is real, tangible—the one great power of the world—the immeasurable, boundless power that sways nations. Rank, fame, love—all are good; but with money you can buy them all—all! Therefore, my friend, if love beckon you one way, and money another, hesitate not in your choice. Take the lawyer's advice to his son as your motto—'Get money—honestly if you can—but get money.'"

"Good, sound morality, that!" sneered John, turning his head, as a long, slender white hand was laid on his shoulder, to meet the mocking dark eyes of the master of Helstone Priory.

"Good, sound sense—never mind the morality, that may be questionable. But perhaps the doctrine might not commend itself to some audiences as much as to my present one."

"How do you know that it will commend itself to me?"

Sir Edward shrugged his shoulders significantly, but did not otherwise answer.

"Pity it was so stormy to-day!" he remarked, presently.

"Stormy! The day's well enough. What's the matter with it?"

John Cadburn's usual manner to the baronet was one of respectful suavity; but to-day he was too thoroughly out of sorts to speak with his customary deference.

"Hardly that—or your face is a bad weather-glass.

But there is no cause for alarm, I think ; the atmosphere will clear presently, and we shall have fair weather and plain-sailing."

The lawyer stared at the baronet as though he thought the latter was taking leave of his senses.

"You are incomprehensible, Sir Edward," he said.

"In other words, then, the young lady will come round—will change her mind."

"She will not," returned John, gloomily. "When she says a thing, she means it."

"My dear fellow"—with a shrug of complacent pity—"there isn't a girl in England who could refuse such a bribe as you have offered this one ; wealth, rank, a handsome and devoted husband—the things which every girl most craves for—are laid at her feet, and you think this girl is so far superior to her sex as not to take them up ? Bah !"

"How do you know what I have offered her, Sir Edward ?" asked John, grimly.

The baronet laid the tips of his delicate fingers upon his ears.

"Two very valuable friends, my dear fellow ! By the bye," he said, with apparent carelessness, "I forget where you said this young lady's heritage was situated."

But John was too wary to fall into that trap.

"I don't think I said at all, Sir Edward," he answered, drily ; "and I am sure you will pardon me if I decline to divulge it at present."

"Oh, certainly ; I have no wish to pry into trade secrets," returned Sir Edward, good-humouredly. "It will come out in good time, I suppose ? that is, if it pays best, I mean. Dear me, it only wants ten minutes to six. Will you come in to dinner ?"

"Not to-day, thank you, Sir Edward."

"Ah, well, you will come up to-morrow ? Christmas-day, you know—to be kept in our barbarous English fashion. How I hate this cold, stupid England ! If it were not that this estate is entailed, I would sell it, and go back to glorious Italy. And yet," mused the young baronet, walking swiftly towards the house,

"it is a noble heritage and, if it were not one's own, well worth years of toil and scheming and, if needs be, sinning to secure it! By the way, I must find out what mare's nest that fellow has picked up, if I can."

Sir Edward had to be rather expeditious in his dressing-room operations, for dinner was waiting when he entered the house. Stella sat near him at the table, and he found occasion to address her several times during the meal.

"That young Cadburn is a decent sort of a fellow," he said once, speaking to her across the table; "but rather irritable and gloomy—don't you think so, Miss Martyn?"

"Possibly he may be, Sir Edward," returned Stella, achieving a very uninterested tone, though she coloured slightly.

"I thought you might have formed an opinion," said the baronet, coolly; adding, with the faintest shadow of significance in his tone, "He seemed not to be in the best of tempers when I met him in the park just now."

"I hope you did your best to cheer him with the light of your countenance, then," said Belle. "By the bye, Sir Edward, have you been sleeping on a grammar and dictionary? You've picked up your English amazingly since you came home—you'll be able to pass muster for an Englishman directly."

The young man did not look exactly pleased at this compliment, but he allowed it to pass without notice, and turning to Duke asked him if he had many patients yet.

"Plenty—on my books," responded Duke. "And there I am afraid they intend to remain, for I am confident most of them will never pay their bills."

"It is very strange," observed Lady Thornton, "but most people seem to think they have a right to victimise doctors. They would not dare to keep members of any other profession out of their money as they do medical men."

"It's only tit for tat," remarked Belle, wickedly. "The doctor does his best to kill people when they are

ill; and when they get well, a very natural spirit of retaliation prompts them to pay him back by not paying him, and letting him die of starvation if they can. And really, I don't know that I wouldn't as lief die of starvation as of poison."

"Starvation is more disagreeable, I fancy," returned Duke.

"It must be a glorious thing to be a physician, when one is not dependent upon one's profession," ventured Stella, timidly; "to have it in one's power to relieve so much suffering—to alleviate so much pain, and to be able to feel that one is doing it, not for bread, but for love of one's fellow-creatures."

"Work gratuitously, eh?" said Belle. "Well, one can always do that. But how many doctors do you think there are who would give away pills and draughts, from love of humanity?"

"How many? I don't know. Some, I hope."

"Not there!" decided Belle. "There may be a few who would do it; but it would be from love of their profession, not of their patients, you may depend."

"Bah!" exclaimed Sir Edward, with a shudder of disgust; "I should think no man in his senses would ever follow the profession of a physician, except from necessity!"

"You wouldn't?" asked Belle, with sly sarcasm.

"No, indeed! I detest sick-visiting."

"I didn't know you ever did any," rejoined Belle, innocently. "Dr. Langley, I would get papa to appoint you family physician in ordinary, only we are neither of us ever ill; and so the post, like so many public ones, would be only a sinecure."

"Ah, we must try and find him something better soon," said Sir William Thornton. "And really, I am afraid that I shall have to appoint him family physician, unless I see Maudie looking a little better soon."

"She looks wretchedly ill," agreed elle.

"I am very well," put in Maude, hastily. "It is only this intense cold trying me a little."

"Our engagement is wearing on her!" was Duke's

mental reflection, as his eyes rested on Maude's pale cheeks. "She can see no end to it, nor can I; it is likely to prove a hopeless, interminable affair. And after all, perhaps I am wrong in allowing my pride to stand in the way of her happiness! Who shall say? It is hard—very hard to know exactly what is right, in this world!"

Sir William, looking at his daughter, also came to the conclusion that she was probably fretting a little over the length to which her engagement seemed likely to extend; and he secretly regretted that that engagement had ever been agreed upon by himself and Duke's father. It was all very well, and he had been very well pleased, when the contract was made, and up to the last few months; but Marmaduke Langley, the penniless doctor, was a very different person in his estimation from Marmaduke Langley, the owner of a large fortune, and the presumptive heir of Helstone Priory; and though, his word once given, Sir William was too proud to retract it, he would have been heartily glad if the engagement could honourably have been broken off, and Maude be left free to form the brilliant alliance her beauty, position, and talents would easily secure.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### STRANGERS IN THE CHURCH.

THE joyous Christmas bells, pealing their glad story through the still, frosty atmosphere, invited the inmates of hall and cottage alike to come to church and listen once more to the "glad tidings of great joy" which would there be unfolded.

Among the many who obeyed the summons were two men, of very different appearance—one tall and slenderly formed, with dark complexion and eyes, and bushy, curling auburn hair and whiskers, the other

thick-set and brawny, and with a bull-dog ferocity of countenance.

They did not go together; indeed, each was ignorant of the other's presence in the church. Each, as if desirous of avoiding observation, took up his station in a remote corner; and by a singular coincidence, the chief object of attraction to both seemed to be the priory pew, for both gazed with curious intentness at its occupants.

The whole of the party at the Priory were there, Sir Edward having yielded, though very reluctantly, to the persuasion of his guests, and, for the first time since his return, set foot in a Protestant church. He seemed very restless and inattentive to the service. Once his eyes wandered carelessly round the sacred edifice; they passed over the various devices in holly and laurel, with a listless, absent glance; but, suddenly flashing with new interest, they fixed themselves upon the face of the elder of the two strangers, and a heavy frown gathered upon his brow. He drew back—perhaps unconsciously—farther into the shadow of the crimson curtain that partially screened the priory pew from the impertinent gaze of humbler worshippers; but from thence his furtive glances wandered continually to the countenance of the stranger.

The service over, Sir Edward hurried his guests as quickly as possible to the carriages drawn up at the gate. But, quick as he was, the elder stranger reached the gate before them, and the younger took up his station in the church porch before the stately party swept through it.

"Who is that gentleman?" he asked of the sexton, indicating the baronet with a careless motion of the fingers. "Sir Edward Langley, did you say? Oh, yes, thank you. I fancied he looked like some one I know. By the bye, I think I've heard that there is some romantic story connected with him—buried alive, or something of that kind, wasn't he?"

And the garrulous sexton willingly related Sir Edward's story to a fresh listener.

Meanwhile, the other stranger, at the gate, had been

asking a similar question, and having received a similar reply, his eyes fell upon Stella's fair, pale face.

"Holy Virgin!" he muttered; adding, aloud, to the person who had answered his former interrogation, "Who is that young woman sitting opposite the one that you call Sir Edward—with the fair skin and dark eyes?"

The man glanced in the direction indicated.

"Oh, that's only Miss Martyn," he carelessly rejoined. "She ain't much account—only a poor governess, they say; only Miss Thornton makes such a fuss of her."

"Miss Martyn—is her name Stella?"

"Aye, that's it, I think."

"Oh! So that's Miss Stella Martyn, is it?"

The voice was slightly raised, and, the man having drawn nearer the carriage, Stella heard the words distinctly. Something familiar in the tone attracted her attention, and she glanced with a slight feeling of curiosity at the speaker—glanced at him and knew him instantly. And with the recognition there crept over her something of the old-time dread and repulsion that the sight of him had always awakened, and for a moment she felt just as she used to feel when she, a neglected, ill-used child, had, on the occasions of his visits to old Margot, crept out of the way, fearful of exciting the wrath of this ferocious-looking man—this man who, she was told, was her father! What was he doing at Helstone? she wondered. Mischief, no doubt! Stella's early experience of his character forbade her to connect him ever so remotely with anything but wrong and evil.

In an instant her thoughts went back to the old time when she had known him, and with a quick association there rose up before her a mental vision of the face of the youth who had sometimes accompanied him on his visits to their home—dark, smooth, treacherous, and marvellously like—instinctively her eyes raised themselves to the face opposite her in the carriage. Yes, there it was! The resemblance that had puzzled her and hitherto eluded her memory was explained;



Sir Edward Langley's face was the face of the boy—older-looking certainly, but the same face.

Forthwith Stella was plunged into a sea of conjecture. What possible connection could there be between Gaspar Laretti and Sir Edward Langley? what possible influence could have made them companions in the old time, and induced Sir Edward to adopt a false name? for the name by which she had known him was not Edward Langley. His reason for the latter course, however, she thought was easily explained. Of course, a youth in the baronet's then position would not wish his real name to be known among such people and scenes as those in which he had been the companion of her father. Her father! was he really her father? She had given very little credence to John Cadburn's story of her birth; but her incredulity was destined soon to be shaken.

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"Thank you," said the younger stranger, when the old sexton had concluded his narration. "Quite a romantic story—and told in a very effective style, too!"—with a smile and bow that, with the accompanying gratuity, fascinated the old man into thinking him a "perfect gentleman." And then, bidding the sexton a polite "Good-morning," the auburn-haired young man found his way to a neat but unpretending cottage, standing some distance out of the town, where he had only the day before taken lodgings for himself and a young girl, whom he introduced to the worthy mistress of the house as his sister, Miss Kate Leicester, giving his own name as Edward Leicester.

As he entered the little sitting-room, a girl—dark and very pretty, with lustrous black eyes and hair—rose to meet him, with a look of eager questioning in her eyes.

"Well, Kate, the search is ended!" he said.

"You—you have found him?" she gasped.

"I have found him," he answered, his brow darkening; "just where I might have expected to find him; but——"

"Where is he?" she interrupted him, eagerly. "Oh!

tell me where he is! I must see him—I must go to him now!” And she was hurrying from the room, when his next words stopped her.

“Have patience a little longer, little girl,” he said. “You must not see him just yet. We must wait here quietly a few days while I look round a little; it will not do to be too precipitate.”

“But I must see him! I must see him!” cried the girl. “How can I stay here quietly when my heart is breaking?—breaking for a sight of him!”

“It is hard, I know,” said the young man, pitifully. “But you have been so brave and patient, Kate, that I am sure you will be brave and patient a little longer—a very little longer!”

\* \* \* \* \*

That Christmas-night the great house was lit up from top to bottom, and the soft, bright lamp-light gleamed through the plate-glass windows, and fell warmly upon the white frozen snow that covered the lawn. Inside, apparently light-hearted merriment reigned, and good old-fashioned games followed each other in unbroken succession. Graceful, light-robed, jewel-decked figures flitted untiringly about the elegant rooms; and one of them, after an exciting game at “Blind-man’s Buff,” laughingly declaring herself thoroughly exhausted, sank upon a lounge to recover her breath.

Stella, feeling rather out of tune with the gaiety around her, had betaken herself to a small, unoccupied ante-room. Happening to raise her eyes to a large mirror that hung opposite the half-open door of communication between the two rooms, and which reflected that part of the larger one where Maude was, Stella saw her throw herself as if tired out upon the couch, and she noted, with quick, pained wonder, how swiftly, when Maude fancied herself unnoticed, the smiles faded from her lips, and what a weary, set expression they took.

Presently she saw John Cadburn approach the lounge, and apparently prefer some request to its beautiful occupant; for, with an air of surprise, slightly

tinged with *hauteur*, Maude rose, and allowed him to lead her away in the direction of the ante-room. Stella saw them coming, and quietly slipped away through another door into the conservatory.

She had been sitting there some time, stowed away in a fragrant little nook behind a gigantic fuschia, that dropped its great crimson, velvety blossoms in a sort of canopy above her head, thinking—thinking sorrowfully of that cold grave in Cleighton churchyard, with the winter snow lying thickly upon it, and the wintry wind howling drearily around it—thinking pitifully of the sad, grief-shadowed young life of Alice Jesson, and how strange it was that, after bravely enduring sorrow and poverty and weakness, she should be snatched away from earth just when happiness was so near her. Truly, thought Stella, the ways of Providence are inscrutable!

Yet, after all, perhaps it was best so. The strong, bluff sailor, tender and true as he was, might not always have been the best possible protector for that delicate, fragile girl. Even in the closest, most tender union there might have been some jarring chord to wound so sensitive an organisation as hers.—“Ah, yes! it may be best as it is—at least, she is happy now!” Stella conceded, with a heavy sigh, and bright drops aching in her eyes.

Presently she became conscious that somebody was slowly passing her retreat, and she heard Maude say, in a tone that Stella perfectly appreciated, though it was lost on the person addressed—

“And so you think this information is worth a thousand pounds? Well, you are right; certainly it is worth that, and a great deal more than that, to me! Of course it would be very hard to have my long-lost sister turning up just now to rob me of my heritage—for that is what it would amount to, she being the elder; I should only have grandmamma’s pitiful thirty thousand left, and what is that? Oh, it would be very hard—very!”

“Very hard indeed,” sympathised Mr. Cadburn, never dreaming of the sarcasm hidden in Maude’s

smooth tones. "I should be very sorry to have any share in bringing such a calamity upon you, Miss Thornton. It is a bargain then?"

"Yes, it is a bargain," assented Maude. "I am to give you a thousand pounds, and in return you are to give me all the proofs you possess that my sister Vestelle, who was supposed to be drowned, is still living; that is the bargain, isn't it?"

"That is the bargain, Miss Thornton—for a thousand pounds the proofs are yours, to destroy at your pleasure."

Maude glanced at him in surprise at the vengeful tone of the last words.

"Pardon me," she said, keenly, "but you have some motive in this besides the desire of gain; you have reasons of your own for wishing my sister to be deprived of her birthright?"

"Possibly so, Miss Thornton," John confessed coolly—he had no objection to do as much now that the bargain was safely concluded; "I have excellent reasons for thoroughly disliking the young lady in question, and I am not the first man whose interest and inclination happen to run in the same groove."

"Certainly not," rejoined Maude, indifferently, as they passed on out of Stella's hearing, leaving the latter almost petrified with surprise.

She had not intended to listen, and had been on the point of discovering herself to them, when a sudden, swift conviction that she herself was the subject of their conversation rooted her to the spot, in a kind of dreamy maze, and she quite forgot the apparent impropriety of remaining there, a listener to conversation not intended for her ears.

It was true then—she was not old Margot's daughter. Of course John Cadburn possessed reliable proof of the fact, or he would never, even with his assurance, have dared to take the step he had taken. She could not only disclaim kinship with old Margot, but, better than that—ininitely better than that—she could claim it with those who already had her warm esteem and affection. She the sister of the proud, beautiful Maude

—the daughter of the elegant, high-bred Lady Thornton and the aristocratic, exclusive baronet! Was it possible?

Then, as the first flash of pleasurable feeling excited by the discovery of her real parentage passed off, the consequences of her recognition by her family ranged themselves before Stella's mental vision.

She, the unknown daughter, was unquestionably the eldest, and as such, heiress of the wide domain Maude had been brought up to believe would one day be her own. Could she deliberately step in and rob her, and through her Marmaduke Langley, her own benefactor, of that rich inheritance? Every generous, every grateful impulse of the girl's nature cried out against such baseness. No! never would she wrong them of the grand old estate, to which she decided they certainly had the best right. She, who had often wished she could act the part of the little mouse in the fable, and do something, were it never so trifling, to help Marmaduke Langley to regain the position he had lost—was she to be the one to put another stumbling-block in his path? Never! never! Rather let her remain in poverty and obscurity all her life, rejoicing in the knowledge that she had sacrificed something for him, in return for all his kindness to her! And her eyes fired, and her cheeks glowed with generous enthusiasm.

It never entered her head to suppose that, by thus voluntarily relinquishing her rights, she was wronging any one but herself—that others, even if they knew of the sacrifice she contemplated, could possibly object to it. Sir William and Lady Thornton had lost their child, Maude had lost her sister, too long ago to feel now any grief for that loss; time had long since deadened the nerves that had once ached with cruel anguish; probably they would rejoice at the discovery of her existence, if it were made known to them, but they would suffer nothing if it were suppressed, and suppressed it must be, Stella decided promptly. She must see John Cadburn, and, if possible, come to some terms with him; if not, why, then she must gain possession

of the proofs in some way. They were her own property, of course, and she would be justified in using any means that included no wrong-doing in the using, to obtain them.

As she left the conservatory, a dark form emerged from the shadow of a tall tropical plant, and the subdued light falling upon his face revealed the features of Sir Edward Langley.

"I have been an idiot," he muttered, "to let a prize like that lie close at hand unobserved. Well, it may not be too late even now to remedy the mistake. I must make a bold attempt to strengthen my position. My position! can it be that it is insecure after all? What evil does the presence of that man forebode?"

Lounging carelessly through the brilliantly lighted rooms, he came across John Cadburn, and affably passing his arm through the young lawyer's, drew him apart from the gay crowd.

"How easy it is to make a false move in one's game, isn't it?" he speculated, idly.

"I suppose it is, for some people," John assented, carelessly. "Has any fresh illustration of that theory lately come under your observation, Sir Edward?"

"Only such as you have afforded me," returned the baronet, fixing his watchful black eyes on the other's face. "My friend, you have taken your wares to the wrong market."

"I am not a huckster, Sir Edward."

"No. Well, we won't quarrel about terms. All I mean to say is, that what may be only worth a thousand pounds to one person may be worth double that amount to another."

"Indeed; and to whom?" asked John, with pretended indifference.

"To me."

"To you?" John stared at him, amazed.

"I don't see anything in that to take your breath away. It is not impossible that I may feel an interest in the young lady—she isn't a bad-looking girl—and——"

"Stay!" John Cadburn questioned, hoarsely, "does that mean that you—you think of marrying her?"

"If what you told Miss Thornton be true, I may."

"Then"—and John Cadburn's eyes blazed fiercely—"I would rather burn every scrap of proof with my own hands, than sell them to you!"

"Nonsense, my friend—don't be so fiery over it! The young lady will not marry you, she says——"

"And will she marry *you*?" interposed John, with a sneer.

"Probably—if I give her the chance. I offer her much more than you can do, remember—position, wealth; these things do not count for nothing with women—poor ones especially."

"But you forget, Stella won't be poor when the truth comes to light. But I don't mean that it ever shall," he added, grimly.

"And suppose I don't mean that it ever shall either?" the black eyes rested searchingly upon John Cadburn's face.

"In that case, I don't see what use the information would be to you."

"And I cannot at present enlighten you. But that does not signify—is it yes or no to my terms?"

"No! I won't help you to marry her."

"Nonsense," again commented the baronet. "As I said before, the girl won't marry you—you know that—and why allow a foolish feeling to stand in the way of your own interest? Besides, she will probably marry somebody soon, and that somebody may as well be your humble servant as another. Don't you see, my friend, that you are only standing in your own light, and doing yourself no good either?"

"I won't trust you," muttered John, under his breath. "Once let you get those proofs, and Stella's promise to be yours, and you would blazon the truth abroad directly! Of course you would—any man would!"

"Very well, my friend; your refusal will not particularly disarrange my plans," observed Sir Edward, carelessly, when Mr. Cadburn intimated as much to

him. "If you change your mind, you have only to let me know, and I will keep to the bargain;" adding mentally, "And if you don't, I shall find some way of putting my hands on your treasured proofs, no doubt, so it doesn't matter a great deal." Then aloud, "Only, let me tell you, if you want revenge upon a certain person who shall be nameless, you have, as I said before, taken your wares to the wrong market."

"I have taken them to the safest one, at any rate, Sir Edward. It will be to Miss Thornton's interest to keep the secret; whereas, as far as I can see, it would be to Sir Edward Langley's interest to reveal it."

"Don't be too sure of that. Young ladies—rich and sentimental ones at least—sometimes get very quixotic and romantic notions in their pretty little heads. But there is Sir Henry Glenmergen looking for me, I see. I must leave you for the present to reflect upon what I have said." And with an easy nod Sir Edward walked away.

John Cadburn looked after him with a curious smile upon his lips. Remembering Maude's manner during the interview she had accorded him, and judging her by himself, he had no fear that she would so far forget her own interest as to make any other use of the power he meant to place in her hands, than the one he wished her to make.

"I don't know," he muttered, grimly, "but that the best way of revenging myself would be to let her marry the baronet—I guess she wouldn't have a very easy life of it! But I can't—I can't do that! Oh, Stella! what have you done? Ruined my life, blighted my hopes, and destroyed every good and generous impulse in my nature!"

It was late, very late, when John Cadburn trudged homewards through the snow, and the bright stars gleamed down upon his half-angry, half-puzzled face.

He had just come from an interview with Stella Martyn, having stubbornly refused to restore her property except on one condition; let her promise to fulfil her engagement, and the tin box and its con-



tents should be in her hands to-morrow morning, not otherwise.

"And that I cannot do," Stella had said, steadfastly. "Ask me anything else—anything—and I will try and do it. But not that!"

He did not at first believe her assurance that she did not intend to make use of the papers; he believed it was only a subterfuge to get the power he held in her own hands, till her earnest entreaties that, if he would not deliver them up to her, he would at least destroy the proofs of her identity before they were seen by anybody else, staggered him a little, and puzzled him not a little. But that also he resolutely refused to do, alleging that, as Stella chose to be so awkward, he would pay her back in her own coin, and that, if the proofs were to be destroyed—as she apparently wished, and he meant they should be—he would get what good he could out of them first.

"Very well," Stella said, with quiet decision; "then I must do the best I can under the circumstances."

"Aye," said John, bitterly; "and that is, to spurn the love of an honest heart, and play for one of those titled and scented fops dancing attendance upon the heiresses in yonder! But you will lose your game, mark my words—such popinjays don't marry poor governesses, whatever your ambition may lead you to think."

"Mr. Cadburn's candour verges upon insult—he will therefore pardon me if I wish him good-night." And with a stately bow Stella swept from the apartment.

And John Cadburn went home musing upon the interview, and wondering if that resolute look in the changeful gray eyes meant mischief.

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## CHAPTER XXX.

### A CANCELLED ENGAGEMENT.

APPARENTLY the contents of the post-bag next morning were not particularly pleasing to the master of Helstone;

for Stella, happening to glance at him at the moment, caught a wicked gleam in his black eyes as he drew from the bag a coarse yellow envelope, with a big, splattering, red-wax seal, and, glancing at the address, crushed it into his pocket.

Breakfast over, Sir Edward left the room, leaving his guests to discuss their various plans for the disposal of the morning without his assistance.

Duke went over to his betrothed, who was standing by the window, and asked her to ride with him; and somewhat to his surprise—for Maude usually had an excuse ready to hand with which to ward off a *tête-à-tête* with her lover—she readily assented; for she was mentally arranging the details of a pretty little romance, which, if people and things would but fall in with her wishes, was to make two people very happy, and herself a trifle less miserable.

She felt pretty sure that Duke had some special reason for seeking an interview with her this morning; and that he found it rather difficult to approach the subject upon which he wished to speak to her was obvious from his unusually constrained manner.

Duke was unhappy—restlessly, miserably unhappy; not the least unpleasant element in his unhappiness being this new uncomfortable feeling that there was something not altogether open and above-board in the conduct of one whom he had believed the impersonation of sincerity. Was it true, he asked himself, that Sybil was right—that there is an ineradicable taint in low blood—that he might as well have tried to educate a pig out of its predilection for wallowing in the mire, as to refine a girl of the *canaille* out of her inborn propensity to deceit and vulgarity, and that both, cleanse them as you will, will return at the first opportunity to the mud and filth to which they were born?

No! Duke would not subscribe to that theory without a struggle. But still the germ of distrust had been implanted in his mind, and distrust and suspicion were so utterly foreign to Duke's frank, honest nature, that they could not be entertained without keen pain to himself.

Then, too, he had not found poverty a particularly pleasant experience. He had been "cut" by many of his old acquaintances—men who in his palmy days esteemed themselves honoured by his friendship now turned on him the cold-shoulder; and though his self-respect told him that the conduct of such men was not worth a thought, still it was not pleasant to endure. And it was one thing to study his profession while he had been placed far above any need of its emoluments,—it was another to be at the beck and call of inconsiderate people, who trespassed on his time without scruple, but who never dreamed of paying him for the services he rendered them.

He sorely missed the ease and refinement and luxury to which he had been accustomed all his life, and which from contrast made his present position doubly irksome and harassing—and no life is more irksome and harassing than that of a poor medical man who has no other means of subsistence than the profits he derives from his profession.

Duke's profits were small enough, and his expenses, curtail them as he might, more than equalled them; the inevitable result being that, instead of his being on the high-road to fortune, his pockets were growing lighter and his heart considerably heavier—which fact, however, made the idea of accepting wealth at the hands of his wife no less formidable to his pride. But he had begun to look upon it as wrongful pride. If Maude would not withdraw from the engagement, he had no right, from any feeling of that kind, to keep her thus entangled for years, wasting her youth, waiting for him.

And besides it all, there was a vague, restless longing in his heart, as long as it must be sometime, to get it over and done with as soon as possible—an undefined sort of feeling that, when he was once irrevocably bound to Maude, he should feel the yoke less galling than now, when every day made the strain upon his feelings more intense, while his power of repressing all exhibition of them grew proportionably weaker, and he felt at times as though, come what might, let the con-

sequences be what they would, the barrier of self-restraint must give way before the overpowering torrent of feeling that raged in his bosom.

So it was that Marmaduke made up his mind to the final plunge. And at last, after a silence of considerable duration, he managed to get as far as,—“Dear Maude!”—then stopped.

“Yes!” said Maude, without turning her head.

This was anything but a promising beginning; so Duke tried again.

“Dear Maude, don’t you think that, under peculiar circumstances, it is permissible for one to change one’s mind?—Rather a lame speech, that!” he commented mentally.

“Under some circumstances, and for a woman—yes,” responded Maude, with quiet mischief, seeing his difficulty, but determined not to help him a whit.

“Not for a man then?”

“Certainly not,” negatived Maude, promptly. “One expects decision of character in a man. He should never make up his mind to anything until he is thoroughly convinced that it is right, and then he should hold fast to his decision. Nothing is so contemptible as a man who doesn’t know his own mind.”

“Then shall I only merit your contempt, Maude, if I confess that I have changed my mind, and that I wish now to ask you for that which I, in my short-sighted pride, once refused to accept—your consent to an immediate union?”

There was a silence for some seconds, during which Maude perseveringly endeavoured to dislodge an infinitesimal speck of dirt from her horse’s glossy side with her riding-whip; Duke anxiously watching her the while.

“I can never think you contemptible, Duke,” she vouchsafed at length, the speck apparently still engrossing her whole attention. “But,” nervously, “suppose I told you that—that I too had changed my mind?”

“You—changed your mind!” Duke said, with slow, astonished utterance. This was so different to any-

thing he had anticipated. Did it mean, he wondered, that Maude wished to cancel their engagement, or only that she objected to a speedy marriage?

"Yes; did you think it impossible?"—and a rich colour crept into Maude's cheek.

"Dear Maude, no! It is not that—I am not such a coxcomb!" he answered, in earnest deprecation; adding half sadly, "And I cannot blame you if you have!"

"You could blame me—you might, if what you are thinking just now were correct!" Maude cried, impetuously. "But, Duke, it isn't because you are poor—you know that—you will not think that! And, Duke, if you can answer me one question affirmatively I will marry you to-morrow, if you wish it."

"What is it, dear Maude?" Duke asked, thinking it a trifle inconsistent that Maude should affirm that she had changed her mind one moment, and the next declare her willingness to marry him.

"Duke"—and the dark, proud face was turned upon him, and the starry eyes were raised to his in earnest questioning—"do you love me?"

"Dear Maude, yes,—you know I do," he answered, truthfully enough.

"Yes, in a way, I know you do. But, Duke, honestly, truthfully—as I know you will speak—do you love me as you should the woman who is to be your wife? If you were free, am I the one whom you would choose from all others, or is there one to whom you could give a sweeter, tenderer love than I have inspired? Now, Duke—honestly, truthfully!"

Duke hesitated, but the radiant eyes bent upon his face forbade the faintest shadow of evasion, even if he would have condescended to it. But not even to keep his promise to the dead would Duke speak falsely; and so, thus closely pressed, he answered, reluctantly—

"Honestly, truthfully—forgive me, dear Maude—there—there is! But, Maude, it—it will vanish soon, and, Heaven helping me, I will be a true, leal husband to you! I will strive never to be false to you in word or thought—my every endeavour shall be for your happiness!"

"And, setting your own happiness aside, you are still ready to fulfil our compact—you will make me your wife next week, if I consent?"

"Yes," Duke answered, bravely. "And in trying to secure your happiness, dear Maude, I shall find my own."

"And do you think"—with a proud, sad smile—"do you think I will accept that sacrifice at your hands? Do you think, Duke, that I could be happy, knowing that in my husband's heart there was a chord that I could not touch—nay, worse, knowing that at any moment it might vibrate at the touch of other fingers than mine? Ah, Duke, if you think so, you misjudge me! How could you think of doing me this cruel wrong?"

The passionate, reproachful tone brought a flush to Duke's cheek.

"I never meant to wrong you, dear Maude," he said gently. "Knowing this, I know you could not have been happy, but I never meant you to know it—you never should have known it through any fault of mine; how you discovered it I cannot imagine. But as it is, we will wait a little longer, dear, till I have conquered this foolish feeling and can give you all that is your right—only have patience with me a little, Maude."

"What a dear, stupid blunderer he is!" murmured Maude. "Duke, Duke, why won't you understand me?" she cried, aloud. "Don't you see that I don't want you to conquer this foolish feeling?—that I won't let you sacrifice yourself to a feeling of duty?—for, Duke, I will not have a husband with only half a heart to spare for me!"

"Maude, Maude! do you mean that—that—"

"I mean," said Maude, "that I think you and I have made a terrible mistake, Duke. And for my own part, I thank Heaven that my eyes have been opened before it was too late. We both meant to do right, but we have both been doing very, very wrong. We ought to have been sure of our own hearts before we entered into a solemn engagement of our own free-will."

And, believing that our engagement will prove a hard, heavy fetter to both, I give you back your troth, Duke, fully and freely. I ought to have done it before; I would have done it, only I could not bear that the world should say that Maude Thornton deserted her lover when adversity overtook him. But I see things differently now; and, my poor Duke, I will not stand between you and happiness any longer."

Duke looked at her, bewildered, unable to realise that he was free. Free! was he free? and if he was, could he, consistently with his promise to the dead, accept his freedom, or ought he to insist upon again taking up the chains with which he had been bound? He made one last effort to keep that promise with the question—

"But, dearest Maude, have you well considered this, or is it only because you are afraid this feeling on my part will not die out? Do not let any fear on that score prompt you to a rash decision, dear. I shall soon be able to love you as you deserve—shame on me that I could ever be unfaithful to you, even in thought!"

"What a piece of inconstancy you are trying to make yourself out, Duke! In the first instance you are unfaithful to me, and then you want me to believe that, in a very little while, you will be just as untrue to the girl who has supplanted me! And"—with a smile—"if you want a proof of the unchangeableness of my decision, find it in the fact that I bear no ill-will to my rival."

With a sudden flash of perception Duke's earnest, scrutinising eyes sought her face.

"Ah! is it so, dear Maude?" he said, and, as the swift, shy flush answered his question, manlike, felt a faint twinge of regret as he realised that what he had been so unwilling to accept had never in reality been his. But the unworthy feeling vanished in an instant, and it was with perfect truth that he uttered the supplementary, "Dear Maude, I am very, very glad!"

But Maude did not look very glad, for her eyes were sad and dreamy. The beautiful heiress was feeling very lonely just then. Of what value, she sadly

asked herself, were her youth and wealth and beauty, when they could not secure for her the faithful love of one true heart? and for an instant something very like a pang of envy pierced her breast, as she thought of the young rival who, without fortune, and with hardly a tithe of her beauty, had not only taken her place in Duke's heart, but had so easily won that other heart which to her seemed such a priceless treasure.

A little sigh escaped her as she raised her eyes to Duke's face and saw the glow of thankful joy there—joy that he was free from *her* claims! Duke met the glance, and smiled.

"What audacious fellow has been trying to steal my property, Maude? Are you prepared to contest an action for breach of promise, cousin mine?"

"If you like to bring one—yes," she answered. "You would get heavy damages for broken heart, lacerated feelings, etc., Duke, if you went into court with such a face as that! I cannot give you credit for your power of dissimulation, fortunately."

"I thought I was an excellent actor," observed Duke. "By the way, Maude, don't you think it was a little inconsistent to reproach me so severely just now for wronging you, when, if you had been sure that my heart was wholly yours, you would have wronged me in just the same way?"

"Possibly; I am not going to defend myself. Shall we ride back through the town? I have a few minutes' business there."

Duke assented, and they clattered up the quiet street till they reached the door with the shining brass plate inscribed "John Cadburn, Solicitor."

Mr. Cadburn was out, the small boy who opened the door informed them. He had received a telegram early that morning to say his father was dying, and he had started off by the next train.

Duke wondered at Maude's disappointed face as she received this intelligence. Some of the glow faded out of his own too, for the sight of that brass plate brought back the uneasy suspicious feeling which he



had for the time forgotten. He rode on in silence for some time, with a grave, doubtful face. Maude, looking at him, divined his thought.

"Duke," she said at last, "such a suspicion is unworthy of you—cast it from you. Do not be so weakly foolish as to let a thought of that kind come between you and happiness now, I beseech you! That it is groundless I would stake my life."

"You think so?" he said, brightening.

"I am sure of it," she answered, warmly. "I would almost as soon believe evil of yonder unsullied snow, as of my sister!"

"Your sister!" echoed Duke, catching the word that Maude had unconsciously let fall—"your sister, Maude!"

"Did I say so? Well, I look upon her almost as a sister, and I love her as such. You will never induce me to believe that she has been guilty of anything worse than a trifling girlish indiscretion—there may have been that, possibly, but nothing more, take my word for it!"

"And you don't think it has a look of deception about it, Maude?" questioned Duke, anxious to have every shadow of suspicion dispelled. "I could not endure to think her capable of deception!"

"Deception!—Do you expect a girl who may have some reason to think she has acted rather foolishly to proclaim it with a flourish of trumpets to the world?—and a sensitive girl like Stella, too!" said Maude, indignantly.

And, suspicion vanishing like mist in the sunlight of Maude's warm championship, Duke began to think that he had been very unreasonable, and to feel heartily ashamed of himself.

Meanwhile, Stella, after some time spent at a small painting with which she was taking very great pains, had gone to the library for a book that she wanted. Finding Sir Edward there, she started back with a hasty apology, and was about to withdraw, but he politely stopped her, assuring her, as he placed the letter with the red seal, at which he was moodily gaz-

ing when she entered the room, upon a desk, which he hurriedly closed and locked, that she would not disturb him in the least. In proof of which, after a few commonplace observations, he quitted the apartment.

Having found the book she required, Stella seated herself in the chair that Sir Edward had vacated on her entrance, and was about to commence its perusal, when her eye fell upon the desk into which he had thrust the letter, and which stood close beside her on the table.

In his haste the baronet had left a corner of the missive sticking out of the desk, and in an instant Stella's eyes caught the disjointed parts of sentences thereon: "Pretty little game"—"but caught at last"—"the real baronet"—"money, or I split"—"night at eight"—"at your peril"—"Gaspar."

Stella tried to fix her attention upon the book in her hand, but the effort was vain; the broken sentences danced between her eyes and the page before them, and she found herself, against her will, endeavouring to form them into a complete whole, while there slowly grew upon her a conviction that that whole, if she discovered it, would be a clue to some piece of villany in which Sir Edward and her long-time supposed father were concerned.

She could, of course, have quickly assured herself of the correctness of that conviction by withdrawing the letter from the desk; but that she would not do; so laying the book aside, and placing her hands before her eyes, she tried, as she mentally expressed it, to think it out. She thought earnestly, intently, for some time without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion, then suddenly, like an inspiration, a flash of something very like the truth came to her. She lifted her head with a determined air.

"No villany is too great for Gaspar Laretti, I am certain," she said to herself. "I believe I shall be justified in trying to sift it out, if I can, in any honourable way."

Uncertain what honourable method of "sifting it out" she could adopt, Stella went upstairs again. As

she was passing a window in the picture-gallery she saw Maude and Duke riding up to the door. Her eyes rested upon them a moment.

"What a noble, handsome pair! And how happy they look, especially Mr. Marmaduke!" she mentally commented. "Well, if anyone on earth deserves to be happy, he does. I wonder when they will be married."

After assisting Maude to dismount Duke sauntered into the drawing-room. His mother, who was sitting there alone, looked up as he entered with a rather discomposed face.

She had been reading a letter received that morning from Lady Aylesmere, and its contents had slightly disturbed her motherly soul; for Sybil, after an elaborate description of her latest Parisian toilettes and the gaiety and admiration she was enjoying as Lord Aylesmere's wife, wound up with a hope that Duke wasn't "making a fool of himself again about that Martyn girl," and an injunction to her mother to "look sharp after him and see that he didn't."

"As if Duke would be so foolish!" murmured the good old lady; "and as if he would even wish to break his word! Don't I know my son better than that?" with a little flash of motherly pride and confidence. Which confidence seemed to her fully justified when Duke entered the room with that new happy light in his eyes; for, knowing that he had had a *tête-à-tête* ride with Maude, she, womanlike, instantly jumped at a conclusion—which, however, for once, happened to be a wrong one.

"Come here, my boy, and let me guess what you are going to tell me," she said.

"How do you know I am going to tell you anything?" Duke asked, with a smile.

"As if you could deceive your mother, Duke!"

"And such a mother too! Well, granted that you are correct in that particular, still I doubt your ability to guess the subject of the communication, mother mine."

"You do? Well, then, you and Maude have come

to a decision this morning?" and the benign face put on a very wise expression.

"Right so far—we have come to a decision," said Duke, slowly.

"Well, when is it to be, Duke?"

"When is what to be, mamma?"

"What? Why, the wedding, of course, you know, Duke!" exclaimed his mother, astonished.

"If you mean my wedding, mother dear, not for many a long day yet—if ever."

"If ever! Duke, my dear boy, what do you mean? Surely not that you, a Langley, have broken your word? Oh, Duke! not that, surely?"

"Not that exactly; but the result is the same. Mother dear, will it grieve you very much to know that my engagement to Maude is broken off?"

His mother's distressed face was answer enough without her exclamation,—

"Broken off! Oh, Duke, my poor boy, what are you thinking of? And I have been so glad to think that you would soon be moving again in your true sphere! Oh, Duke, not broken off entirely—irrevocably? It is only a lover's quarrel, that you will make up again, won't you, Duke? I can't believe that Maude has offended you past forgiveness;"—in her motherly pride never imagining but that the broken engagement lay at Duke's door. "Her fault must be serious indeed, Duke, to force you to break your word, not only to her but to your poor dead father—oh, my boy, how can you?"

"Mother dear," said Duke, gravely, "don't you remember that my promise to father was given conditionally—that I said if Maude were willing I would marry her? And is it quite impossible that our peerless Maude should not think your son the very best and noblest man on earth? Be that as it may, however, we have both decided that our engagement is a mistake, and, as such, we are justified in cancelling it."

"But, Duke, of course Maude thinks more of you than of any one else, or why did she engage herself to you?" cried his mother, indignantly. "She had ample

time to make up her mind, and she has no right to treat you like this now! But she doesn't mean it, I know; you have offended her in some way, and you must try and make your peace with her again—don't be stubborn, Duke, there's a dear boy,"—laying her hand entreatingly upon his shoulder.

Duke contrived at last to make her understand that there was no hope of his engagement being renewed; and she sat still for a time, with a face of such intense disappointment as cut her son to the heart. He strove, with smiles and bright, hopeful words, to console her.

"But, Duke," she said at last, her wistful eyes coming to his with a look of anxious questioning, "I am afraid that there is something at the bottom of all this that you have not told me. Is it true, as Sybil says, that you have been so foolish as to let somebody else step into Maude's place?"

Duke's cheek reddened slightly, but he did not answer; and his mother went on—

"Duke, my dear boy, promise me that you will not think of lowering yourself by contracting an engagement to one so much beneath you. I don't mean to say anything against her personally," she added, quickly, as Duke seemed about to protest;—"she is very nice and good and lovable, I know, in her place, but not as my son's wife. Oh, Duke, I could not bear the thought of a girl like that becoming your wife! Promise me that it shall not be."

"Dear mother, that I cannot do," Duke said, gently and gravely. "My life's happiness has been nearly lost by one rash, unconsidered promise; I cannot put it away again by another. And you, dear, when you have recovered from the first feeling of disappointment—disappointed ambition for your unworthy son—will be the first to wish me God-speed, and bid me be happy, if I may, with one who is beneath me in nothing except in social position—in all other respects she is all that you could wish her to be—and what is that, dear mother, when there is nothing else to which anybody can take exception? and besides, there are very few people who know anything of her real origin.

Why, mother," said Duke, with a smile, I had no idea that your pride of *caste* was so deeply rooted."

"It isn't that altogether, Duke," said the poor disappointed mother, already beginning to think, as she generally did, that whatever her idolised son did or wished to do must be right. "Though I can't feel that such a girl is good enough to be your wife, I wouldn't mind so much if you were rich, as you used to be. But when I know that, poor as you are now, almost your only chance of regaining the station to which you were born lies in making a wealthy marriage, how can I, after all my ambitious dreams for you, feel reconciled to your sacrificing your prospects in this way?"

"My prospects!" smiled Duke. "How many wealthy heiresses do you expect to find ready to lay their fortunes at the feet of an almost penniless doctor, mother mine? There is scant chance of my ever 'regaining the station to which I was born' if my doing so depends upon my drawing a golden prize in the matrimonial lottery. No, I must content myself awhile in a lower station, till I can work my own way up, with hand or brain, to another. And you too, dear, will feel willing that it should be so presently," he added, confidently.

"I—I shall, I daresay, if it is for your happiness, my dear," his mother said, more resignedly. And with a warm kiss of thanks for the concession Duke left the room.

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

### STELLA MAKES A DISCOVERY.

"MAY I come in?" said Maude's voice at Stella's door, as the latter was dressing for dinner; and receiving an answer in the affirmative, the young lady entered the room. She had hurried over her own toilette, having a special object in view.

"Dressed already?" said Stella. "You have been expeditious, or else I am very late."

"You are not late at all; don't hurry yourself." And Maude quietly seated herself, and waited till Stella threw off the dressing-gown, preparatory to donning her dinner dress.

"What lovely white shoulders!" admired Maude. "And yet you always cover them up with tulle or something; how is it?"

"Only because I don't feel exactly comfortable with them uncovered—you see I was never meant for a fashionable lady."

"You might feel comfortable enough, I should think, with such a neck as that. What is that mark on your left shoulder?" said Maude, carelessly, indicating two rows of small indentations, and coming nearer to examine them. "Why, they look like the tooth-marks of some animal!"

"That?" answered Stella, unsuspectingly. "Oh, I think I have heard my mother say I was bitten there by a large dog in my infancy, and those are the marks of its teeth. There's another mark a little lower down on my arm—a red one, something like a hand holding a dagger—but that is a birth-mark, I believe."

"The Thornton birth-mark!" ejaculated Maude, under her breath. "And the accidental mark—she has both!" But she made no outcry over the discovery; and presently made some careless remark upon an entirely different subject.

Stella was at a loss to account for the sudden interest that her host seemed to have taken in her. Hitherto he had never taken any particular notice of her; now he was scrupulously polite and attentive to her. Stella could very well have dispensed with such attentions from him; they gave her no pleasure, for she instinctively distrusted him and them.

A little before eight Stella made her escape from the drawing-room. She was suffering from a headache, and fancying that a breath of fresh air might do it good, she threw a warm cloak over her shoulders, and putting on her hat, made her way into the grounds.

Without any special reason she directed her steps to the Lady's Avenue—a long open glade, with a thin fringe of high bushes separating it from a narrower and more secluded path that ran parallel with it.

She had scarcely turned into it, when the low sound of voices on the other side of the bushes reached her ears—one soft and musical, the other harsh and guttural. She recognised both, and unconsciously slackened her steps, uncertain whether she ought to turn back, or take the opportunity, which accident had thrown in her way, of ascertaining the correctness of her suspicions. She quickly decided on the latter course, her own good sense telling her that such a plot, if it existed, ought to be unveiled and crushed at once.

"Well, well," the musical voice was saying, when she first caught any of the conversation, "there's no use in quarrelling, I suppose. You think you have made a grand discovery—mark you, I don't for an instant acknowledge that you have; but still it might be an annoyance if such a tongue as yours were let loose—so I am willing to give you a trifle to keep it quiet."

"A trifle!" echoed the other. "It must be something more than a trifle that keeps my tongue quiet, Signor——"

"Sir Edward Langley, if you please," corrected the first speaker, haughtily.

"Oh, ah, yes—Sir Edward Langley, of course. Very fine indeed, I'm sure. And we look every inch a baronet, too!" with a mocking laugh. "I wonder what our friend—the young fellow who looks so much like us that we left up in the mountains—would say, if he could see us in our style and grandeur! He would be apt to be jealous, I'm afraid—not that it would make any difference to him, oh, dear, no! We acted very shabby though, didn't we, when we slipped away from all our faithful friends without giving them a hint of what we were up to? Very shabby of his captain to get all the plums in his own pudding in that way, Gaspar Laretti thought it, so he determined to track his old friend, and see what he was



about. And when Gaspar pretends to do a thing, he don't very often fail; so here he is, Signor Ludo—Sir Edward Langley, I mean, of course—come for a few of the plums, if you please."

"You shall have some, my good Gaspar," answered Sir Edward, in a conciliatory tone, though his brow blackened, and his eyes gleamed fiercely. "This is a wild tale of yours, and of course nobody would credit your unsupported testimony for an instant: I am not influenced by your threats, but still, as I said before, it would be annoying for such a thing to get afloat, therefore I am willing to buy your silence—to give you, say, a couple of hundreds, if you will promise to go back to Italy and to keep silent for ever."

"A couple of thousands, if you like," returned the other, coolly.

"Impossible! I cannot do it!" ejaculated Sir Edward.

"Very well; my help will be worth as much to the real Sir Ed——"

"Hush!" peremptorily interposed his companion. "I must have a little time to think over such an exorbitant demand. Two thousand pounds! I don't see how I can possibly raise it."

"Dear me! we haven't got a comfortable little balance at our banker's then?" rejoined Gaspar. "But you must raise it by to-morrow night," he added, grimly, "or you'll find my 'unsupported testimony' rather more than you care to face. And it must be in cash, mind you—no cheques."

"Don't alarm yourself; I am not going to excite suspicion at my banker's by giving you a cheque for that amount. I will see what I can do by to-morrow night, and meet you in the barn at the end of the avenue." And Sir Edward strode away.

His companion looked after him with a chuckle.

"Not quite deep enough to beat Gaspar Laretti!" he muttered. "The mean scamp! to sneak away from us in that style to better himself! If he'd told me what he meant doing it wouldn't have been so bad; and I'd have helped him—for a share in the profits, of

course. A paying game, too!" he added, glancing around him; "only rather too much for one to have to himself. But then, he always was for playing the gentleman in the city, while we others did the work and netted the purses that came in our way. I might have known, though, that he'd got something more in his head than he told me—I thought we were only to get a heavy ransom for the youngster out of the dodge."

Stella had heard enough, and was gliding away, as she hoped unperceived, when there was a sudden crash among the bushes, and Gaspar's heavy hand was laid on her shoulder, while his harsh voice said—

"Halloa! young woman, what do you want here?"

"Nothing," returned Stella, briefly and haughtily. "Take your hand off my shoulder, if you please, and let me go."

"Don't be in quite so much of a hurry," said Gaspar, grimly. "I've a notion that I ought to know you—that is, if you're Stella Martyn."

"I am Stella Martyn—what do you want with me?"

"Well, that's a good one! What does a man want with his own daughter? You've grown a nice-looking girl since I had the pleasure of seeing you last, my dear."

"I acknowledge no relationship to you," said Stella, with a mental thanksgiving that she had good reason to believe this odious man was not her father; "nor do I believe that any exists between us."

"Ah, that's the way with us!—we get so flash that we're ashamed to own our father and mother! We didn't use to be quite so spirited, if I remember right. But then we've got up a bit since then, I suppose. I daresay now we've got a few pounds that we could spare for our poor old dad, eh?"

"I have no money; and if I had I certainly should not submit to be robbed of it," said Stella, decidedly.

"Well, then, perhaps you've no objection to my going to some of your fine friends and asking them to help me, for your sake? I can do that, you know. It

wouldn't be quite so pleasant for you, perhaps, but still——"

"You will do nothing of the kind," interrupted Stella, though she was terribly afraid that he would, for she knew he was capable of anything—afraid not so much for herself, as for the disgrace that would, through her, be reflected on Mrs. Langley and Duke, and the other friends who had been so kind to her; for of course, if she intended to keep her real birth a secret from the world, she could not disprove this man's word, if he declared himself her parent. And then, how could she endure that Mrs. Langley and Duke should think her the child of this brutal ruffian, or that they should be asked to give alms, for her sake?

"You will do nothing of the kind," she repeated, firmly. "You would get no money from them if you did; you have no claim upon me, and they are not likely to be imposed upon by a falsehood."

Stella had taken a high tone, knowing that was her only chance of keeping him quiet; and if she had seemed in the least cowed or intimidated he would certainly have executed his threat. As it was, he determined to take his revenge out by annoying her as much as possible.

"Ah, well, I'll try it on," he said; "I shan't be any farther out, at any rate. Ah! here comes one of our fine gentlemen—it isn't Sir Edward back again either."

Stella looked at a figure which the newly-risen moon revealed, and which was coming directly towards them—it was Duke! She made a frenzied effort to throw off the hand upon her shoulder. The man chuckled.

"Don't be in such a hurry to get away," he said. "You needn't be afraid of being seen with your own father, surely."

"Let me go!" Stella panted, excitedly. "That Mr. Marmaduke!"

"Mr. Marmaduke, is it?" Gaspar said, without taking the trouble to lower his voice, watching her struggles to free herself with grim amusement. "And

who is Mr. Marmaduke?—and what if it is Mr. Marmaduke?"

"Did you speak to me?" asked "Mr. Marmaduke," who had caught the sound of his own name, approaching them. "Why, Stella! you here, and—what are you doing with Miss Martyn, sir? Release her instantly, if you please!"

"And suppose I don't please?" returned the man, defiantly. But he removed his hand from Stella's shoulder; and she sprang away from him to Duke's side. "What's it to do with you, may I ask?"

"You will probably discover, if you attempt to molest her again," Duke said, haughtily. "Stella, I will take you indoors, unless—unless this person is here by your wish," he added, gravely.

"Oh, no, no! he is not!" cried Stella. "How could you think so, Mr. Marmaduke?"

"Bless me, it wouldn't be such a dreadful thing if he did think so, would it?" put in Gaspar. "There's many more unlikely things than that a girl should want to see her father."

"Her father!" echoed Duke. "Stella, who is this man?"

"He—he says he is my father," faltered Stella; but it isn't true! He isn't—I know he isn't—he can't be!"

"Not very likely," said Duke, his eyes wandering from the girl's pale, pure face to that of the black-browed, burly ruffian. "At any rate, it is too cold to stand here discussing his claim to that title just now. Come, Stella." And he led her back to the house, making only one observation on the way thither.

"Stella," he said, "have you any reason to think that man is not your father? Can it be proved, do you think?"

Stella hesitated, in a dilemma; then she answered, bravely—

"I don't think he is—I feel sure he is not; but I cannot prove it;" adding mentally, "And I cannot prove it, of course; I have no proofs; and all my care must be to keep others from proving it. I will not

throw down my burden because it is proving a little heavier than I expected."

They entered the house unobserved. Stella went upstairs; Duke passed into the library, where a bright fire was burning. No one else was there; and he stood looking at the fire and thinking.

The advent of Gaspar Laretti had complicated matters considerably; and for a brief moment Duke almost wavered in his resolution to ask Stella to be his wife. For though he hardly believed it to be the case, still, possibly the man might be Stella's father, and it would be unpleasant—terribly unpleasant, he confessed to himself, to have that low, coarse ruffian coming forward and claiming relationship to him through his wife. His wife!—a tender glow lit up his face at that thought; and in the impetuous tide of feeling that followed it this obstacle, which had so suddenly arisen, was swept away, and Duke felt brave enough to endure a score of such fathers-in-law. What, he thought, was the pain that such an alliance would cause him, compared to the happiness of calling the girl he loved his wife? Nothing—less than nothing!

Meanwhile Stella was in her own room, wondering what she had better do with the discovery she had made. Her first impulse was to tell Duke; her second, and the one on which she acted, to consult Maude, and keep it from Duke till matters were a little ripier.

And so, when Maude retired, she found Stella in her room, waiting for her.

"Why, what have you been doing with yourself? I've scarcely caught a glimpse of you all the evening," exclaimed Maude.

"Are you too tired for more than a passing glimpse of me now?" asked Stella; "because if you are, I will defer my communication till to-morrow."

"I'll try and bear the infliction. Julie, you can go to bed; I'll manage by myself to-night. Well"—with a smile, as Julie retired—"what is this weighty secret?"

But the smile faded, and her face became very grave,

as Stella told her what she had discovered. She sat still and listened in blank amazement.

"The villain—the base villain!" she uttered, as Stella finished. "And we—how could we have been so deceived? Stella, are you sure your ears did not deceive you? It seems impossible!"

"No, there was no deception, as far as my ears were concerned. Now, Maude, what can we do to set this crooked affair straight?"

"I don't know," answered Maude, thoughtfully, "but we must do something, that is certain. Our poor Edward! What a daring imposture! And the fellow recognised everybody, you know—people that he could never have seen, too!—and he seemed to know everything that poor Edward would know. How could he have done it, Stella, and he an impostor?"

"Very easily—a great many things—if the true Sir Edward was of a frank, open disposition. And he has been in England several times in his life, to my knowledge. It is quite possible that he may have seen some of the people whom he recognised; then probably Sir Edward had a great many portraits of different people. Of course he would get them. And as to the rest, most likely he has papers about that would tell us a great deal, if we only had them."

"Yes, but we haven't; and how can we get them?"

"We cannot get them, of course, but others can. Stronger hands than ours will be required in this business; but we must be careful not to alarm the impostor; and I have decided on our course of action—that is, if you approve, of course," and Stella unfolded her plan.

"That will do, I think," approved Maude. And the two girls separated.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

## A BURNT OFFERING.

STELLA heard with considerable satisfaction the news of John Cadburn's absence from Helstone, for she intended to make a bold *coup*, in order to regain possession of that troublesome little tin box; and it would be much easier to do it while John was away, for she thought it very improbable that he had taken it with him.

So next morning, after inquiring if Maude or Belle had any commission that she could execute for them in the little town, Stella started for Helstone alone.

Reaching Mr. Cadburn's office, she inquired for that gentleman—of course, receiving from the small office-boy the answer that he was not at home. Then saying—what was perfectly true—that she was rather tired, Stella asked permission to sit down by the office fire a few moments, which permission was instantly granted; and she seated herself in the chair that the small boy set for her beside the fire, and chatted with him, while her eyes wandered keenly around the apartment—sadly afraid lest Mr. Cadburn had seen fit to put that special box under lock and key, in which case she must give up the attempt to recover it; for of course she could not, even if she had the opportunity, go ransacking his drawers and desks, and breaking open locks, like a burglar.

Eagerly her eyes scanned the rows of "pigeon-holes." Nothing like her box at first rewarded their scrutiny, but presently she fancied she saw a corner of something very like a tin box peeping from behind a roll of parchment. She felt pretty sure that was the very box of which she was in search; but how was she to make certain of it? She could not go boldly to the pigeon-hole and examine it while that boy sat there; still less could she take it away, even if it proved to be the one she sought. No, she must get rid of that

small boy, if possible. So, having ascertained that he was new to his work, and had not yet outgrown an inordinate appetite for sweets, she gave him a small silver coin, and sauntered out of the office to a shop window a few paces off.

As she expected, the temptation to exchange that coin for sweetstuff was irresistible. Presently the outer door opened, and the small boy, leaving it slightly ajar, started off at full speed in the direction of the shop where he could obtain the toothsome commodity, and which happened to be some distance down the street.

With a rapid mental calculation of the time his errand would take him, and a hasty glance round to ascertain whether she was observed, and to decide that she was not, Stella walked back, and a moment after found herself again in the office; the small boy having taken the precaution of locking the inner door, and also—fortunately for Stella's errand—of leaving the key in the lock.

In an instant the little tin box was in her hands. Yes, it was hers; she knew it immediately, though it had been opened since she saw it last. With quick, nervous fingers she abstracted its contents—a few neatly-folded sheets of paper, written over closely in very black ink, that was all. Then she took two or three fresh sheets from the pile that lay upon the desk, and folding them hastily, put them in the box in place of those she had taken out, and replaced the box precisely as she had found it, thinking that she had better not take it away, lest it should be missed before John Cadburn's return.

All this occupied scarcely a minute, Stella feeling the while very uncomfortable, and very much as if she were stealing some other person's property instead of only reclaiming her own; and then she slipped out of the office again, locking the door behind her, and the next minute was proceeding leisurely down the street, very well satisfied with her morning's work, though very much disliking the manner in which she had been compelled to set about it.



"It is my own property," she told herself several times, "and John Cadburn had not the slightest right to it. I should very much have preferred facing him bravely, and taking it from him with his eyes open; but that I couldn't have done, I know. And I am very glad I have got it."

Safe in her own room once more, Stella sat down to peruse the papers she had abstracted from the tin box.

"How white and fresh they look!" she commented, spreading the sheets of paper out upon the table. "They have kept remarkably well all these years; one would think they were only written lately. Now for the 'Confession of Margot'—Margot what? Laretti! Why, I always thought that name was only assumed by her husband! Margot Laretti! How strange!" And then Stella went on to read:—

"I, Margot Laretti, wanting to ease my mind of a crime that has been a great burden to me sometimes, and drove me to drink many times when I wouldn't have done it—at least, I don't know as I should—am going to write this, so as, if anything should happen to me before the time I took the oath for is up, people may come by their rights—Amen.

"Five-and-twenty years ago I lived with my father and mother at Thurley Farm, on the Castle Thornton estate. My father was only a poor farmer, and of course I didn't get a first-class education, but I learnt to read and write; and I used to be thought a good-looking lass in those days. I had plenty of sweethearts too; but I held my head up, and wouldn't take up with the sort of beaus that came after me; for though I was only a poor girl, and didn't know such a mighty deal, I was proud, and had got some very grand notions in my head. Other girls, no better-looking than me, had married well, and why shouldn't I do the same?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have been quite so high in my notions, only my mother had been foster-mother to the young heir, Mr. William Thornton; and when we were children he used to pet me, and play with me, and make as much fuss with me as if I had been as good as he was. And so he did till he was about twelve,

when he went away to a great school; and the night before he went away I saw him, and cried like a baby to think he was going away for such a while. And then he laughed at me for crying, and said he would come home and marry me when he was grown up. And I thought he meant what he said—I didn't think it was only a joke to pacify me. And so I grew up with the notion that I was to be a match for the master of Castle Thornton; and I laughed at the silly fellows that came after me for thinking they could get a girl that was meant to keep company with their betters, and held my head up, and dressed as smart as I could, and tried to learn a bit—but I couldn't make much out at that. And I used to go about the estate and plan what I would do when I was mistress of it; and when I was by myself I wrote my name, 'Margot, Lady Thornton,' to see how it would look—and very fine it did look, too, I used to think; and I wouldn't do any more house-work than I was obliged, so as to keep my hands white for the time when I should have nothing else to do but sit in the great drawing-room at the castle, and learn to play on the grand piano, like other fine ladies.

"And so while I was dreaming like that the time went on, and at last Sir William came of age. But he didn't come home for six or seven years after that, and when the news came to say that he was coming at last, people said too that he was going to bring his wife home with him!

"But I knew better than that, I thought—I knew very well that he wouldn't take his wife home to Castle Thornton till after he came home himself. And so when the day came I dressed myself in my best, and went out with the rest of the people to welcome him home. I wouldn't stand in the crowd, because I felt myself above them, and because I was afraid he wouldn't see me amongst so many; so I stood by myself, a little way off, when the carriage drove by.

"And there in the carriage—I shall never forget how I felt—sitting by Sir William, and looking just as proud and fond of him as she could, was a grand

lady—his wife! Oh, how I hated her! And then the people shouted, ‘Hurrah for Sir William and Lady Thornton!’ and I felt as though I could kill them for shouting, and went away somewhere by myself and raved like a mad thing. And in my rage I swore I would be revenged, and I meant it, and I’ve kept my word.

“Well, after that I married Gaspar Laretti—a young Italian fellow as used to come courting me. I married him for spite; and he found it out somehow, and we lived a cat and dog life for nearly two years; and then, soon after my girl was born, he went away, and left me to do as I could.

“Lady Thornton’s twin girls were born just about the same time, and I put my own child out, and got the place of nurse to them. And then I bided my time; I waited till they got a nice size to run about, and Lady Thornton nearly worshipped them—everybody could see that—and I was so glad, for I wanted to tear her heart to pieces!

“I should have waited longer still—for I didn’t mean to do just what I did do—but my own child died suddenly when they were about three years old. I went to fetch her from the place where I’d put her; and then I dressed her in some of the oldest twin’s clothes, and put her in the lake in the grounds. Then I took the oldest twin and went away with her to London, and changed my name to Margot Martyn, and called the child Stella Martyn, so as not to be found out if they suspected anything. But they didn’t, for my girl was just about such a looking child as the oldest, and they didn’t find her till the water had altered her; they never thought but what it was one of the young Thorntons that was found in the lake. And my lady, she took on awful—she was so bound up in her children; besides, I left a letter behind me to say as I daren’t face her ladyship again, after what I’d done.

“And when I took the child away, I swore the most awful oath I could think of, that Lady Thornton should never have her again till she was twenty-one

—and if I was on my death-bed I daren't break that oath—and that I'd bring her up as low and ignorant as any child of the streets ever was ; so that she should be nothing but a disgrace to my proud lady when I did take her back—such a disgrace that they'd wish she'd died ten times over sooner than they should have to own her again.

“ And I've done my best to keep my oath in that—she's as ugly and ragged a little imp as any I see ; and I hate her—the mean-spirited, creeping little wretch !—just as bad as I hated her mother. I know I make her life a misery to her, and I'm glad. Oh, mine's been a fine revenge ; and it isn't over yet—I wish she was twenty-one ! But I don't always feel like that ; sometimes I get a bit low-spirited over it, and then I get to the drink to cheer me up.

“ But soon after I got to London, Gaspar Laretti found me out again ; and he saw the child, and of course he knew it wasn't mine, for he had found out where I put mine, and been to see it two or three times, and the last time they told him it was dead. He said I was a fool to hamper myself with other people's children ; but he promised not to tell of me, if I gave him all the money I had about, and I did, and he went off again. But he comes every now and then, and takes every farthing he can lay his hands on, and threatens to tell if I don't give him more ; and he'll bear witness that this is true.

“ When I stole the child she had on a fine muslin dress that Lady Thornton made with her own hands, and a pair of socks that she worked as well ; then there was a gold sleeve-clasp and a locket and chain that she wore. I took care of all the things, and I shall wrap them all up with this, so as they may all be found together, if anything happens. And if there's any more proof wanted, she's got the Thornton birth-mark on her left shoulder, and the mark that old Carlo's teeth made when he snapped at her close against it.—Margot Laretti.”

This confession was dated about a year prior to

Margot's death. Stella laid it down with a sigh of pity for the sinful, passionate woman.

"What has become of the clasp and the other things, I wonder?" she soliloquised. "She says she would put them with this. Probably she altered her mind though, and they are lost. Now for the *auto-da-fé*. Once burnt, these papers will fall into nobody's hands, and you, Mr. John Cadburn, will lose your thousand pounds. I hope the loss will have a good effect upon you, and make you a trifle less ready to lay hands on other people's property."

And then, her face lighting up with generous enthusiasm, Stella tore the papers into small fragments and threw them into the fire.

"A very small sacrifice to make for one who has been so good to me!" she murmured. "And Maude, too,—dear Maude, it would be very pleasant to have a right to call you sister, but I must be content to call you friend instead. And after all, I am no worse off than I always thought I was—than I should have been if the box had been burned as I supposed, and this discovery never been made; I have lost nothing, except what I never had."

And thus philosophising, Stella went off to seek Maude. She met Belle in the corridor.

"Here's pretty doings!" commenced that young lady. "I've been scolding till I'm very near black in the face."

"Scolding whom?" asked Stella, with a laugh.

"The world generally, and Maude Thornton in particular. I wouldn't have believed it of her,—and I believe most things of most people, too,—would you?"

"I can't say till I know what 'it' is."

"Can't? What a lamentable state of mind you must be in! Our societies for starting missionaries to civilise the heathen might send a batch of 'em into Star-land with advantage, I think. Well, what do you say to a quarrel between Maude Thornton and Marmaduke Langley? Oh, I don't object to your looking as if you didn't believe me,—conscious rectitude upholds me."

"Nonsense! They quarrel! impossible!"

"Did, I assure you. Got up a regular fight; pitched into it right and left, and broke—an engagement."

"You don't mean that their engagement is broken off?" said Stella, amazed.

"What a fib! when that's just what I do mean. How they could do it I can't imagine," said Belle, with a solemn face. "I can understand that the world might by some process be turned topsy-turvy,—in fact, I daresay it isn't a long way off that position now; I can even believe that stars might descend to this terrestrial sphere and walk about; but really, this is too much! My faith in human nature is in a galloping consumption. There goes the luncheon bell—perhaps a slight snack may revive it."

"Revive what?—the luncheon bell?" asked Maude, joining them.

Belle favoured her with a glance of solemn reproach.

"I wonder at you, Maude," she said, severely. "But words are wasted on one so hardened, therefore I give no vent to my feelings. Look here,"—turning suddenly on Stella—"what made you send Sir Edward flying off to London this morning?"

"I send him? What have I to do with Sir Edward's goings or comings?" said Stella, absently; thinking disappointedly that, if Duke's engagement to Maude were really and permanently broken off, that sacrifice of hers had been made in vain,—in vain!

"Well, mind you don't have, that's all," said Belle, as they went in to luncheon.

Stella rejoiced in Duke's return to all his old kind, genial manner to her; but she never thought of connecting it with his broken engagement; and it made her all the more grieved that he would not, after all, derive any benefit from her self-forgetful act.

Towards evening Sir Edward returned. He was apparently in the highest spirits, but it was evident to the two girls who were watching him that his gaiety was forced and assumed.

"Stella, my dear," said Belle, as the latter came

near her, "will you have the goodness to set either Sir Edward Langley or your humble servant right as to the religious opinions of the celestial luminaries? He thinks they calmly smile down upon good and evil, and all sects and persuasions, alike. But I tell him no, I never met with one yet that wasn't a good Protestant, and viewed Roman Catholics with especial disfavour, and would never dream of smiling on anybody who wasn't very near as much of a saint as John Wesley."

"What has John Wesley to do with it?"

"Very little, poor old fellow, now, I should think—rest his ashes! I only disturbed him because I wanted a comparison; and you know—

*John Wesley was a good old man,  
Who lived in days of yore.  
He used to wear an old gray coat,  
All buttoned down before.*

Stay, was it gray, or brown, though? I forget which, and of course that's a material point."

"Duke," said Maude, taking a seat beside him, "how long is it since you paid a visit to poor Mr. Grantham?"

"Nearly two months now, I think. Why, Maude?"

"Didn't I understand you that, on your last visit, the doctors thought he was improving?"

"Yes, they thought with care he would in time recover his reason."

"Well, I wish you would go and see him to-morrow, Duke. Will you?"

"To-morrow?" hesitated Duke.

"Yes, to-morrow. And if he has recovered sufficiently, bring him here a little while, Duke; the change will do him good."

Duke looked at her, surprised.

"Why, Maude, what now? Bring him here! and without Sir Edward's permission!"

"Certainly without that, Duke. There is an urgent reason for his presence here. Stella and I have a little plot afoot, and you must second us; but you must not seek to pry into the mystery at present."

"Rather hard, that," commented Duke. "However, if that is the case, there is nothing left me but to blindly obey. What a pair of conspirators! I suppose, then, it was a part of your 'plot' for you to ride off alone to Mr. Barton's this morning?"

"Didn't I tell you not to make impertinent inquiries?"

After breakfast that morning Maude had ordered her horse, and rode off, accompanied only by a groom, to the house of Mr. Barton, a county magnate, and a J. P. to boot.

She found that gentleman at home. He was the father of several blooming daughters, who all professed unbounded admiration for Maude; so there was nothing to excite attention in her visit, which was ostensibly paid to them. But after half-an-hour's chat with them, Maude asked Mr. Barton if he could spare her ten minutes.

"Ten times ten if you like," replied the gallant old man, showing nothing of the surprise he felt at the request.

"You are too generous," said Maude, laughingly; "I should be sorry to test your patience so far."

But the ten minutes she had bargained for passed, and another ten at the end of them, before Maude emerged from the library, where her interview with Mr. Barton was held. Both looked very grave; and Maude, resisting the girls' entreaties that she would stay to luncheon, mounted her horse and rode back towards the Priory.

As she neared the cottage where Mr. and Miss Leicester had taken up their abode, the auburn-whiskered young man was standing against the little gate, looking up the narrow country road in the direction of Helstone with an absent gaze. Maude's eyes fell on him as she rode up: they travelled slowly from the dark, clear face to the fiery hair, and then to the fiery whiskers, with keen scrutiny; and, half unconsciously, she slackened her horse's pace. A strange, wild notion flashed across her. She waited impatiently for him to turn round.



He did so presently, as his preoccupied ear caught the sound of horses' hoofs, and his eyes met hers. She saw the eager light flame into the dark orbs; she saw the half start of surprise; she heard the half-uttered exclamation—and instantly resolved to make him speak.

"Will you ask Mrs. Crutson to give me a glass of milk?" she said, graciously, riding up to the gate.

The young man raised his hat politely, and Maude's eyes fixed upon the bushy auburn locks.

"A wig!" she uttered, under her breath; "I'm sure of it."

"Mrs. Crutson is not at home, Miss Thornton; but I will get you some," and he turned into the house, but came back directly, saying, "If you will come in and rest a moment, my sister will get you some refreshment."

"You have a sister?" said Maude, looking puzzled; accepting the invitation, however, for she had been casting about for some excuse for obtaining an interview with this young man without outraging "the proprieties;" and, leaving the horse to the care of the groom, who had by this time come up, she followed Mr. Leicester into the house.

The sitting-room was empty when they entered.

"Will you take a seat, Miss Thornton?" he said. "I will call my sister down."

"Stay!" said Maude, impulsively, her breath coming quickly; "before you do that, please tell me your name."

"My name?—Edward Leicester."

"Indeed!" incredulously. "If I had guessed your name, I should have said Edward——"

"Edward what, Miss Thornton?"

"Edward Langley!"

The dark face flushed; the dark eyes met hers with a smile, and the next instant the wig and whiskers lay on the floor, and Edward Langley's voice said,—

"And you would have been quite right if you had, Maude,—dear Maude! how glad I am to see you!" and his hands clasped hers eagerly.

"And I am very, very glad to see you, Edward!" Maude assured him, warmly, with shining eyes. "Poor Edward! poor wronged Edward! Tell me how you escaped from that monster's power."

And Edward told her how he had been entrapped, and how, after he had been a prisoner for some time, Ludovico suddenly disappeared, leaving his young wife, Katrina, almost wild with grief and suspense, for she knew nothing of his plans, and had not the faintest idea why he had left her, or whither he was gone.

She was very kind to the sad-faced young stranger whom her husband had brought to their mountain-home, with the injunction that he was to be well cared for, but strictly watched. Which injunction was obeyed to the letter; he was kept under strict surveillance, from which there was not the slightest chance of escape. One day, however, the brigands returned laden with spoils taken from some English travellers, and among them were some English newspapers. In one of them, under the heading, "Romance in real life," the prisoner read a glowing account of Sir Edward Langley's return to his paternal acres, and then some idea of the plot, of which he had been made the victim, dawned upon him. He longed to tear the usurper from his ill-gotten position, but forced himself to appear patient, though he watched more eagerly than ever for a chance of escape. But none offered itself, and at last he decided that his only hope was by enlisting the sympathy of one of that rough band, to induce him to favour his escape. And what a forlorn hope that was! Which of those surly ruffians would be likely to yield to his persuasions or promises?

But there was Katrina. She might be less invulnerable; he might influence her perhaps through her passionate, loving woman's heart; at any rate he would try. So he told her that he believed he could find her husband, and if she liked, they would go together and seek for him. And Katrina,—poor, fond, heartsick Katrina—longing only for a sight of the man who had so basely deserted her, after a little hesitation eagerly

consented, and contrived his escape one day when Gaspar was out of the way—when he had, though they did not know it, started for England,—and the two, Edward and Katrina, set off on their quest.

And then, his story told, he and Maude having held a consultation, Edward called Katrina into the sitting-room and introduced her to Maude.

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### CHAPTER XXXIII.

#### WHICH IS THE IMPOSTOR?

AT half-past eight Gaspar Laretti was waiting in the avenue for Sir Edward to fulfil his promise. His brow blackened in an ugly scowl as the minutes lengthened into another quarter of an hour, with no sign of Sir Edward.

“He’d better not play me false,” he muttered, walking backwards and forwards in the shadow of the building indicated by the baronet as their place of meeting, and buffeting himself with his arms to keep himself warm. “I’ll wait ten minutes longer, and then if he’s not here, let him look out for himself.”

But at the end of five minutes Sir Edward was there, and, he having unlocked the door of the barn, the two passed in, Sir Edward inveighing bitterly against the cold.

The barn was divided into two compartments, with a door of communication between them. This Sir Edward shook to ascertain if it was locked; and satisfied on that score, the baronet proceeded to business. He produced a roll of crisp bank-notes, and a freshly written document, which last he handed to the other, keeping the bank-notes in his own possession.

“Sign that,” he said, laconically.

“Hum!” scanning the paper, “and so, in consideration of the sum of two thousand pounds being paid to me, I, Gaspar Laretti, am to renounce for ever all claim on Sir Edward Langley! Oh, yes, that I don’t

mind doing. I'm quite willing to renounce all claim on Sir Edward Langley,—in fact, I don't think I've any to renounce; but I won't say as much for the man who calls himself by that name."

"Will you sign that paper, or will you not?" demanded the other, controlling his passion.

"Well, I don't know that I mind doing that either," returned Gaspar, deliberately. "It's easy enough to sign, if there's a pen and ink handy"—Sir Edward produced a pen and a pocket inkstand—"and I'm not obliged to keep to the bargain," he finished, with a grim smile, as he affixed his name to the document.

"You will be obliged to keep it, of course; this will be a safeguard against any future attempt at extortion."

"No 'safeguard' at all, Signor Ludovico. Because, if I came again next week for another two thousand pounds, you daren't produce that paper against me; for if you did, you know people would be wondering what sort of a claim I could have on Sir Edward Langley, and then they might take it in their heads to make inconvenient inquiries, and——"

"Arrest Gaspar Laretti and Ludovico Barolezzi on the charge of conspiring to defraud Sir Edward Langley of his title and estate by unlawfully imprisoning and detaining the said Edward Langley," finished Mr. Barton's sonorous voice, as, the inner door having been noiselessly unlocked, he and several other gentlemen, accompanied by the Helstone Superintendent of Police, entered.

Ludovico's face whitened visibly; but he haughtily shook off the hand that was laid upon his shoulder, his black eyes flashing with lurid fire.

"Are you mad?" he said. "You will have to answer for this insult, sir!"

"Not to you," returned Mr. Barton, composedly.

"Yes, to me—Sir Edward Langley."

"Prove that you are Sir Edward Langley, and I am ready to answer for it at once."

"A well-known fact needs no proof," returned Ludovico, defiantly. "Prove that I am not Sir Edward

Langley if you can, and bring Sir Edward Langley to prove it."

"He is here!" and Edward Langley stepped forward. "And, Ludovico, he is here willing to forgive. If you will only confess the fraud of which you have been guilty, no criminal proceedings shall be taken against you. You are welcome to the money you have squandered, and you shall have the two thousand pounds you have given that man; I cannot say more."

"A generous offer, truly," rejoined Ludovico, mockingly; "I regret exceedingly that I cannot accept it. Gentlemen," turning to the others, "I don't know what story this man has told you, but it must have been a plausible one or it would not have imposed upon gentlemen who are well known to possess a large stock of shrewd common sense, and induced them to take this step. What I do know is, that he is the leader of the gang of brigands who kept me prisoner for so long, and that he intended to assume my name and take possession of my inheritance. But my escape frustrated his plans; and now he wants to trade upon his resemblance to me. He is an impostor, gentlemen—a clever, audacious impostor—nothing more, nothing less! And what makes his conduct more base and treacherous is, that I once trusted and treated him as a friend!"

This appeal was delivered with such an admirably assumed air of outraged pride, such apparently genuine indignation, that Edward stood amazed, and for an instant Mr. Barton was staggered. Then recovering himself, he said, sternly—

"Then you prefer leaving it to the law to decide which is the impostor?"

The moonlight streamed in through the one small window upon the excited faces of the group. Edward waited anxiously for the answer. It came at last, haughtily defiant,—

"I will leave it to the law. I shall find it easy to prove which is the impostor. I certainly shall not give up my birthright at the bidding of a ruffianly brigand—one of whose associates has even now suc-

ceeded in swindling me of two thousand pounds, only because I knew it would be unpleasant to have such a rumour circulated amongst my friends, not because there is any foundation for it."

"There may be two versions of that story. At any rate, you are our prisoner for the present; but, as we do not wish to treat you with undue severity, we shall take you to the Priory to-night. As to the other man, your confederate, I don't know——"

"Take him to the Priory as well, for to-night, Mr. Barton," put in Edward. "He can be removed to prison to-morrow, unless Ludovico thinks better of my offer, in which case the matter can be settled privately."

"To prison, eh?" said Gaspar, sullenly. "Come, Signor Ludovico, you see the game's up; you'd better take the terms, and get off with a whole skin if you can. As for me, if you're stupid enough to take the law, I can turn Queen's evidence."

Ludovico glared at him fiercely, but uttered no sound.

Well guarded, the two men were marched off to the Priory. As they neared the entrance a girl, who had been for the last hour flitting noiselessly round the house, peering in first at one window then at another with eager, anxious eyes, stood against the hall-door, with her white face pressed to the cold glass that formed the upper half of the door.

She turned and shrank back as the group came up. But the light fell upon Ludovico's dark, angry face, and she sprang to his side with the glad cry—

"Oh, Ludovico, Ludovico! my husband, I have found you at last! The holy Virgin be praised!"

Ludovico turned to her, startled for an instant out of his assumed composure; only for an instant, then his face hardened, and he looked at her with stern, severe eyes, and tried to pull away the hand to which she clung.

"My good girl, this intrusion is ill-timed," he said, coldly. "I do not know you, or your business; but you seem to have mistaken me for another person."

You had better go away now, and the matter can be set right another time.

"Go away! Not know me!" and poor Katrina, hardly believing her ears, burst into tears. "Oh, Ludovico! you must know me—your Katrina!"

They had passed into the hall, Katrina clinging to Ludovico's hand, and sobbing and crying over it hysterically. The noise brought all the Priory guests into the hall, Duke among the foremost.

"Why, Edward!—Mr. Barton! what is the matter?" he began, in astonishment, his eyes wandering from one excited face to another of the strange group. As they reached the other Edward's they widened with amazement; they went back to Ludovico, and back again to Edward, who was silently smiling; and then, with a flash of conviction, Duke sprang forward,—

"Edward!—my dear Edward!"

"Duke!—dear Duke!" And the two were in each other's arms; while Maude was smiling with quiet pleasure, and the rest were gazing bewilderedly at the scene—all except Stella, who was, of course, in the secret, and Belle, whose quick wits grasped the truth in an instant.

And then poor Katrina's sorrowful, heart-broken plaint fell again on their ears.

"He doesn't know me!" she cried piteously, turning to Edward. "Oh, Ludovico, don't you know me really? You do—you must know me—your wife, Katrina! Oh! say you do know me!"

But the cold face never softened; the hard, bitter eyes gave no sign of recognition.

"Ludovico, for pity's sake speak to her," said Edward, hastily.

"I do not know her; she is nothing to me," persisted Ludovico, and relinquishing his hand with a moan, the girl sank to the ground.

Belle stepped forward indignantly.

"My poor girl," she said, with real feeling, "if that man is really your husband, Heaven help you! He is as hard and cold as a rock. He Sir Edward Langley! What on earth have we all been thinking of?"

"I don't know," said Duke, passing his hand across his eyes; "I can't imagine. It seems to me that I have been——"

"As blind as a bat," finished Belle, politely. "So it seems to me. Well, are we going to stand here staring all night, or shall we have a change of programme? Here, Thompson," to one of the open-mouthed servants, "lift this poor girl to a sofa near the drawing-room fire. I'm afraid she has fainted. Mr. Barton, what are you going to do with your prisoners?"

"Put them in the strong-room, under a competent guard," replied Mr. Barton.

Which was accordingly done, and presently something like order was restored; and they gathered round the fire in the drawing-room, talking, wondering, questioning, and explaining. Katrina lay upon a sofa, assiduously attended by the three girls, her eyes closed, her lips quivering, but uttering no sound save an occasional plaintive moan, which went to their hearts, for it spoke of a sorrow before which their remedies were powerless.

"The Siamese Twins clipped in two!" was Belle's comment on the likeness between the real and the false Sir Edward. "I begin to feel awfully 'creepy.' If people are coming up out of their graves one at a time in this style, I shall soon be scared to go about, especially in the dark. I think a general resurrection would be an improvement. One would know that there were no more to come then; as it is, really I don't feel safe. How do I know but that every one of our dead-and-gone ancestors will see fit to quit their coffins, and come trooping in a lugubrious procession through the room this blessed minute? Ugh! it's a horrible, marrow-freezing state of affairs, in my opinion."

"Duke," said Edward, putting his arm round Duke's shoulders, as they stood a minute together by the fire after the others had retired, "I have been so sorry to hear of your misfortune. You must let me do for you what you would gladly do for me, if our positions were reversed; for the sake of old times, Duke, you must let me buy you a good practice, if I succeed in estab-



lishing my identity, and ousting the usurper—and I think I shall.”

“I feel sure of it,” Duke said, confidently. “Right will conquer might for once, Edward. I shall look Mr. Grantham up to-morrow. I sincerely trust he will have recovered sufficiently to give his evidence, which, of course, will be important, he having known the man before he attempted to perpetrate this fraud.”

“Poor Mr. Grantham!” said Edward, sadly. “And my poor, poor father!—both victims to that villain’s cruelty. How nicely he must have calculated the effect of his blows. Oh, Duke, sometimes when I lay in that mountain-prison and thought of my poor father, I felt as if I were going mad, and I believe it is almost a miracle that I have kept my senses. Perhaps, knowing the weakness of my nerves, he calculated on my losing them—my senses, I mean. Well, Duke, we must keep our eyes open the next few weeks, and if we see a nice fat practice for sale, why, then, well and good.”

And Duke, knowing that the offer sprang from real brotherly love for him, thanked his cousin frankly and gracefully, and accepted it, only amending it a little.

“I will not let you buy me a practice,” he said, smiling; “but I will let you lend me the money to buy it, because I want very much to get on a little, and my experience hitherto assures me that without help it will be very slow work. I am less sanguine than I was at first. Perhaps that makes me less proud, but I think you are the only one from whom I could take such a favour, Edward.”

“Then I must try not to grumble, if I can help it, that you won’t let me do more,” said Edward, making no attempt to alter the amendment—not from want of will, but out of consideration for Duke’s feelings.

And when Duke laid his head upon the pillow, it was with a heart full of thankfulness, not the least cause of gratitude being Edward’s kindly offer, which, if fulfilled, would, he hoped, bring his life’s happiness so much nearer to him, doing away with years of weary waiting for it.

The next day found Ludovico doggedly determined not to give up his position without a struggle. It was a position worth fighting for, and, though fate just now seemed against him, there was a possibility of his coming off victor; and, not being well versed in the English law, he had an idea that, if he lost, at the worst the penalty would be only a few months' imprisonment. And as to the two thousand pounds that Edward had offered him as the price of his confession, he had taken care to put aside, where he could instantly place his hands on it, a much larger sum than that.

He haughtily demanded his liberty when Sir Edward and Mr. Barton visited him, affirming that until the law had declared him an impostor they had no right to treat him as one.

"You have no more right to imprison me than I have to imprison you," he said to Edward. "Each says the other is an impostor, and it is not for either of us to assume the mastery till others have decided which is right. You need not be afraid that I shall attempt to escape," he added, scornfully. "If I meant to do that, I should take the bribe you are so kind as to offer me. No, I will fight to the last."

And there being at least a show of justice in this argument, his liberty was given him, after all his papers had been secured; and the two rival claimants remained at the Priory, waiting for the day when the great battle should be fought to decide which had the right to remain there as its master, and which should become the inmate of a prison cell.

Katrina lay upstairs for some days in a kind of stupor, apparently knowing nothing of what was going on. She was attended professionally by Duke, and kindly cared for by all, except the one who should have cared for her most—Ludovico; for all pitied her sincerely, and, forgetful of her connection with the impostor, thought only of her share in Edward's escape.

Among Ludovico's papers was a collection of photographs, each with the name and address of the original written on it, and a note-book filled with information

relating to, and anecdotes of, various people, which threw some light on his prompt recognition of them and knowledge concerning them.

Duke went to the private asylum in which he had placed Mr. Grantham, and found him so far recovered from the shock he had sustained, that he gently imparted to him the information that Edward was not dead, and—not thinking it necessary to confuse his still weak intellect with the details of the plot—that he would be wanted presently to identify his former pupil—that was all. The impression left on Mr. Grantham's mind was that the body which lay before his eyes on that dreadful night was Edward's, but that he had recovered from the wounds then inflicted, and having returned home, had got into some trifling law dispute, and wished Mr. Grantham to go into court to recognise him.

Duke did not, as Maude had instructed him, remove Mr. Grantham to the Priory. There being no immediate need of his presence there, the young man thought it would be best to leave him under the skilful care that had already done so much for him. And well satisfied with the result of his visit, Duke returned to the Priory.

Ludovico's face changed slightly as Duke informed the interested little group of listeners of the improvement in Mr. Grantham. This was a link in the chain of evidence against him for which he was unprepared; but it did not shake his resolution.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### SELF-SACRIFICE.

UNDER the circumstances, of course there were no festivities to celebrate the New Year at Helstone Priory. But on New Year's Eve Duke decided to put his fate to the test—to ascertain whether, in one

respect, the coming year was to bring him joy or sorrow.

They had been out walking—Duke, Edward, and the three girls—and the latter had gone to their rooms to resume their indoor attire; Edward had found some business to call him to the stables, and Duke went into the library, which chanced to be untenanted, and waited for Stella to come down—waited impatiently till he heard the soft rustle of feminine garments crossing the hall; and then Stella, passing the half-open door, heard her name called softly.

“Yes?” she said, presenting herself.

“Come here; I want to talk to you,” Duke said, as he closed the door.

And then, taking her hands in his, and looking down at her drooping face, all aglow with happy surprise, Duke told her, in his own simple, manly fashion, the story of his love for her, and asked her if she would be his wife.

“Not just now, dear,” he added; “but will you wait for me until I have made a home for you—a simple, modest home, that our love shall elevate into an earthly paradise? Is this too much for me to ask, Stella, my darling?” he said, looking at the face from which the glow had faded—faded, leaving it white and almost rigid as marble.

Stella was realizing, with keen, bitter pain, what she had done when she so rashly destroyed that confession of old Margot’s. She could see now how she was to have been the little mouse she had so often wished to be—how through her Duke might have been reinstated in something like his former position. Oh! if she had only waited patiently, instead of hastily and foolishly taking her destiny into her own hands! But it was too late now! she had thrown away all possibility of establishing her identity, and she must always be only Stella Martyn; and, bitter thought! she had sacrificed Duke as well as herself—sacrificed him just when she thought she was serving him best! Oh! why had she never guessed that Duke loved her? Duke loved her!—her, the penniless orphan,

the obscure dependant on his bounty, and, for all he knew, the daughter of that low ruffian who was lying in durance, charged with conspiracy, and who was so meanly treacherous that he could even turn upon his old companion—Duke loved her! It seemed incredible—impossible! And she stood there, silent and motionless, crying voicelessly for strength to put away from her this beautiful love—this dazzling, tempting future that he was offering her. Ah! if she could only accept it! But she must not—she would not! She would not drag him down to poverty; if she could not raise him out of it, she would not be a clog upon him—a dead weight to prevent his rising—no, never!

“Stella, why don’t you answer me, dear?” he said, in pained surprise.

“Because I—I cannot,” she whispered, hoarsely.

“Cannot! Do you mean that you cannot love me? Not in time, dear?—I don’t expect it just now.”

“I—I can never love you more than I do now,” she faltered.

And he, in his blindness never guessing the real meaning of that broken sentence—misunderstanding it just as she meant him to misunderstand it—dropped her hands with a heavy sigh, and turned away.

And Stella, white and faint, crept away to her own room, to do battle alone with her great pain.

“The sacrifice is complete!” she murmured. “And he will never know that it was a sacrifice. But it is best so; he will the sooner forget me. Heaven grant that I have not hurt him as I have hurt myself! That could not be though—he cannot love me as I love him!”

Stella did not go down to dinner; and soon afterwards Maude came up, but finding the door locked, stole down again; for which Stella was thankful, feeling as if she could not endure to see any one just then.

Duke was pacing restlessly up and down the drawing-room floor, after the others had retired, when Maude came to his side.

"Duke," she said, softly, "something is wrong—what is it?"

Duke turned his pale face to her.

"Everything is wrong, Maude! Idiot that I was to think she could love me! I might have known that she could feel for me nothing but gratitude. And yet, just at first, she looked as if my words had made her very happy, and I thought she was going to say yes—and that made the blow seem harder when it came."

"She has refused you?" asked Maude, in amazement. "I cannot understand it, Duke. I felt so sure that she loved you."

Duke shook his head, smiling sadly.

"*Nil desperandum!*" said Maude, brightly. "It will come right yet, Duke, I am sure; for I am convinced that, if Stella has refused you, it is not because she doesn't love you, but for some other reason."

"If I thought that—But what other reason could there be?" said Duke.

"Leave me to find out," returned Maude. "I will be your fairy godmother, Duke; and I've a presentiment that I shall wave my wand to some effect. Only keep a brave heart. Good-night;"—adding to herself, as she went upstairs, "This is too bad of you, Miss Stella, after all my plotting, and just when I thought things were going on so nicely. What is the matter, I wonder?"

Maude meant to find out what was the matter, though it was not very easy to approach Stella upon the subject. But in the interests of those she loved Maude was brave; and so, next morning, she speedily found an opportunity of speaking to Stella alone.

"Stella," she began, gently, "I am afraid you have been doing a very wrong thing."

Stella changed colour slightly.

"Have I?" she said. "Very likely; I often do."

"Such a wrong as I think you have done, one can only do once or twice in a lifetime," Maude went on, gravely. "Stella, how could you wound poor Duke so? He has not deserved it."

The crochet-needle dropped from Stella's fingers; her cheek flushed hotly; but she made no reply.

"Stella, forgive me if I seem impertinent and intrusive, but I love Duke too well to see him so unhappy without trying to discover the cause of his unhappiness, and, if possible, to remove it."

"Dear Maude, you cannot remove it," Stella said, with tremulous lips.

"But you can," rejoined Maude, reproachfully, "and you will not! Stella, if you do not love him, I should be the last in the world to wish you to remove it. But if you do care for him, are you justified in paining him thus?"

"I cannot help it!" murmured Stella, passionately, but in so low a tone that no ears less quick than Maude's would have caught the words. "I would die to save him pain, but I cannot be a burden to him! I will not—I will not!" Then, aloud, she said, "Yes, I am justified in what I have done; and some day, when—when——" Stella choked over the sentence—"he is happy with somebody who is more worthy of him, he will thank me for it. If I inflict pain now, it is to save him greater pain in the future. He will soon forget me, when I have gone out of his life, as I shall have done soon."

"He will not," said Maude, steadily; "he will never change while he lives. And as for going out of his life, of course you will not do that, Stella; for you will often meet him, you know, when you come to see me."

"Our paths must not cross again," said Stella, sadly, "when I go back to my own sphere. I ought not to have stepped out of it this time."

"Your 'sphere,' if Herr Wilstein reports truly, promises to be a higher one than you will acknowledge," said Maude, with a smile. "He says that Miss Stella Martyn bids fair to distinguish herself."

"But that will not be for a long while yet, if she ever does," rejoined Stella. "Dear Maude, I have quite made up my mind to be a poor governess for some years to come."

"Just the mate for a poor doctor, then," quoth Maude, lightly.

"No," said Stella, "for I should only be a hindrance instead of a help-meet to him."

"You are incorrigible," pronounced Maude. "I shall tell Duke I have failed utterly, and send him to plead his own cause again."

"Oh, Maude, please don't do that!" cried Stella, earnestly. "I could not bear it again. It will only pain us both needlessly."

"That will do," said Maude to herself. "We shall see, perverse creature," she added, aloud; and then skilfully turned the conversation.

"The fairy godmother has been at work," Maude told Duke, the next time she saw him.

"Well?" he said, eagerly.

"Well, it is as I said, Duke; it isn't because she doesn't love you that she has refused you, but because she does love you."

Duke looked puzzled.

"I don't understand how that can be," he said.

"Can't you understand, Duke, that true love is unselfish, and will sacrifice itself rather than its object? If Stella were rich and well-born, she would say 'yes;' as it is, 'no.'"

"Is that it?" said Duke. "Are you sure, Maude? Did she tell you?"

"Not in so many words—you don't suppose she did that, Duke?—but I gathered it from what she said, and her manner—that told me as much as anything."

"If that is all," said Duke, cheerfully, "I can soon over-rule that. I will try, at least. Where is she, Maude?"

"Stay," said Maude; "take the fairy godmother's advice, Duke, and leave things as they are for awhile. I want a little time for my spells to work, you know," she added, with a laugh.

"But, dear Maude, I can't live in suspense, when there is a possibility of ending it," objected Duke.

"Very well; go to her now, if you like; but you will get no other answer than the one you have



already had. You know yourself, Duke, that when Stella makes up her mind that a thing is right, you can't talk her into thinking it isn't."

"Then you think there is no hope for me?" asked Duke, with a sigh.

"I don't think anything of the kind. On the contrary, if you will only wait awhile before asking her again, I will guarantee that you will get 'yes,' instead of 'no,' for an answer, unless I am sadly mistaken."

"I don't see what advantage is to be gained by delay," said Duke.

"What an impatient creature you are, Duke! Don't you see that her resolution is red-hot just now? and can't you wait till it cools a little? It isn't very much for me to ask, Duke; and you know I only wish for your happiness."

"Dear Maude, I know that," Duke responded, gratefully. "And you have lightened my burden already; I think I can wait patiently for the rest now. But think, dear, if what you say is true, how my—how she must be suffering."

"She is suffering, there is no doubt of that," rejoined Maude. "But, Duke, you would not lessen her suffering by your entreaties; you would only make it harder for her to do what she thinks is her duty. Only trust to me for a few days, and it will all come right, depend upon it."

And though Duke would very much have preferred testing the power of his eloquence again at once, he thought perhaps Maude knew best, and yielded to her wishes, until the time came for his return to his patients, and that was the next week. Then, forgetful of Maude's injunctions, or perhaps thinking he had delayed long enough, he made a fruitless effort to overcome Stella's resolution. This time he could see how it helped her to persist in it; but persist in it she did.

"You will live to thank me for it," she said.

"Never!" Duke answered. "But, Stella dear, I shall not despair. I will work hard to make a home for you, and a name; and then, when I have risen

beyond the possibility of your 'dragging me down,' I shall come and ask you to share my honours; unless,"—and Duke's voice was anxious, though he tried to speak lightly,—“unless you should marry some one else in the meanwhile. Is that likely, Stella?”

Stella shook her head.

“I shall never marry,” she said. “And I, too, am going to work hard.”

“Don't you think, little girl, that it would be easier and sweeter to work if we worked together?” and Duke caught the two little hands in his, and bent his dark, handsome head to look at her averted face.

“Oh, don't—don't tempt me so!” cried Stella, entreatingly, not thinking of the admission she was making,—an admission that brought a bright glow to Duke's face. “It is hard enough in itself, but you make it so much harder!”

“Do I?” said Duke. “You do love me then, Stella, though you will not say so? Then you belong to me, little girl, and I shall surely win you in time; I have no fear now. Only I should like to hear you say, ‘Marmaduke, I love you!’ Stella, when will you say that?”

“When I am your equal in the world's eyes,” said Stella, her white cheeks dyed crimson; “not before.”

“Don't you know, little one, that you have almost as good as said it now?” Duke said, softly. “And so I will try to wait patiently for that day; it will come, I know,—it must!”

And with a heart which, if not exactly light, was lighter than it had been, for some time, Duke went away.

Stella would have gone too when the vacation ended, and Sylvester Hall was re-opened; but, she being an important witness in the forthcoming trial, her stay at the Priory was insisted upon. Those of the other guests who were neither related to the master of Helstone, nor particularly interested in the result of the trial, departed; Mrs. Langley, the Thorn-ton, and Belle and her father, remained.

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The memorable day came round at last,—came with a nipping frost, and an icy-blowing wind, that had anything but a beneficial influence upon the tempers and patience of the purple-cheeked, mauve-nosed big-wigs who conducted the case, and made their tongues almost as keen and nipping as itself.

We will not weary our readers with a detail of the inquiry, which lasted several days. Stella was one of the first witnesses called, and she told her story simply and gracefully. It was another link for which the impostor was not prepared; he had had no idea before that she was identical with the ragged, barefooted child he had occasionally seen at old Margot's, and great was his amazement when she declared she had known him in those days as Ludovico Barolezzi.

Then came the testimony of the poor, prematurely old man, Mr. Grantham, who, being led into court, instantly identified Edward, and declared that Ludovico was the gentleman with whom he and Edward had been intimate in Naples before that dreadful night.

It was a well-contested case, and Ludovico's counsel fought well for his client, stigmatising Mr. Grantham's story as a wild emanation from a weak, half-crazy brain; Stella's as unreliable and improbable; and Gaspar's—who had, as he threatened, turned Queen's evidence—as a wicked and baseless fabrication. But notwithstanding this, every one felt that the case was going against Ludovico, and though the verdict was, of course, waited for with breathless interest—verdicts always are—every one knew instinctively what it would be.

And for once every one was right; the law of England decided on the side of truth and justice, and pronounced Edward Langley the rightful baronet, and owner of Helstone Priory and its broad lands, and condemned the impostor to seven years' penal servitude.

The news was instantly telegraphed down to Helstone, and great were the rejoicings thereat. Bells rang, bonfires blazed, and Sir Edward's tenants drank Sir Edward's health in Sir Edward's ale, and ate Sir

Edward's roast beef; while the worthy Mason, acting on her instructions, immediately set on foot preparations for a grand entertainment on the morrow, to which all the county families were invited.

It was a merry party that entered the Helstone-bound train at Euston Station that night. Duke, who was in court at the close of the trial, was impressed, and carried down with them. As Duke was handing Stella into a first-class carriage, a young man hurried past to take his seat in another carriage. His eyes fell on the pair; he stopped, stared a moment, and then, with a bitter smile curving his lips, hastened to his place.

"So that's it, is it?" he muttered, vengefully. "That's what has been going on in my absence! How dare he look at her like that!—how dare she let him! Ah, well! perhaps I shall find a way of putting a stop to it, Miss Stella Martyn!"

Mr. Cadburn's first movement, when he entered his office, was to examine the tin box; his next, to summon the small boy, and sternly inquire who had had access to his office in his absence.

"Ever so many people called at the door," the trembling boy informed him; "but nobody came inside the office but a lady and Sir Edward Langley,—at least the gentleman that used to be Sir Edward Langley."

"A lady and Sir Edward Langley!" repeated John. "They did not come together?"

"Oh, no, sir; Sir Edward didn't come till about a quarter of an hour after the lady was gone. She only came in to rest herself a few minutes."

"Did you leave her alone in the office?" his master asked.

"Oh, no, sir," the boy said again; "I was in here all the time she stayed, and I only left Sir Edward here a minute, while I went to get him a glass of water," he volunteered, anticipating the next question.

With a puzzled face John Cadburn dismissed the boy, after sternly enjoining him in future to admit nobody, under any pretext, into the office during his absence.

"Which has it, I wonder?" John soliloquised. "Sir Edward, probably, or he who was Sir Edward, as the boy says. Much good it would have done him, even if the law hadn't interfered with his plans in that direction. Both here, were they? Ah, well! I anticipated such a visit."

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

### "FOUR LITTLE WORDS."

"A GENTLEMAN to see Miss Thornton," was the announcement next morning. And Maude went into the reception-room to meet Mr. Cadburn, who began to apologise for his delay in executing his part of the bargain.

"It needs no apology," Maude assured him. "I regret that you should have to assign so sad a reason for it," glancing at his mourning dress. "I am glad, however, that you are prepared to fulfil your promise now."

John Cadburn bowed, and assured her that it afforded him quite as much gratification; after which he produced the little tin box—in precisely the same state as when he first opened it before Christmas—and handed it to Maude.

"Please to examine that, Miss Thornton," he said. "That is all the proof I have to offer you, but I have no doubt you will think it sufficient."

Maude's breath came quickly as she opened the box and inspected its contents.

"Quite sufficient proof, especially as I have seen the marks on her shoulder," she said. "Now for the other part of the business," and Maude left the room, returning in a few minutes with a cheque, which Mr. Cadburn received with a well-pleased smile.

"Our business is concluded now, I presume?" Maude said, not resuming her seat.

"Certainly, Miss Thornton," John assented, "though

I confess, if you intend destroying those tell-tale things immediately, it would be a gratification to me to assist in the destruction."

"You shall have that gratification when I do destroy them," promised Maude, with that curious little smile of hers, "but I must look over them again first. How strange that you should dislike my sister so much. Perhaps it is fortunate for me though that you do. Poor girl! it seems a little hard that she should have fortune and friends so near her and never know it, doesn't it?"

"She does know it," John answered quickly, his brow darkening as he remembered his telling her on Christmas Eve.

"She knows it?" cried Maude.

"Yes, she knows; and she sadly wanted to get the proofs—to destroy them, she said; and when I wouldn't give them up, she begged me to destroy them—not to let you see them on any account. And it seems she visited my office while I was away—hoping to get them, I suppose; but, anticipating such a visit, I had taken them with me, only leaving in the box a copy, which I made before I started, of this confession. When I returned, that was gone; whether she had it or not I cannot say. But her knowledge of the facts need not disturb you, Miss Thornton; she need never know that you have the proofs, unless you like."

"No, certainly not, unless I like," returned Maude, absently; then said, mentally, "She knows! and yet refused Duke because she meant to be a poor girl all her life! Wanted to destroy the proofs! What new mystery is this? I must put on my thinking-cap. Good-morning, Mr. Cadburn," she added aloud, and John departed.

After another careful scrutiny of the trinkets and papers contained in the box, Maude took it up and went to her mother's room.

Lady Thornton was there alone.

"Dear mamma," commenced Maude, "I have something to tell you; do you think you could bear to hear it now?"

Lady Thornton looked in surprise at Maude's glowing face and luminous eyes.

"It is nothing very alarming, my dear, judging from your face. Yes, I can bear to hear it. Does it concern yourself, my love?"

Maude paused, hardly knowing how to break it to her.

"It does not concern me, mamma; it does, too, though, in a way, and I am very glad; and yet it concerns your daughter."

"My daughter, and not you, Maude! I cannot understand. What do you mean?" said Lady Thornton, in an agitated tone.

"Can't you guess, dear mamma? You—you had another child, you know."

Lady Thornton sank back on the sofa.

"I—I had!" she uttered, "but she is dead—dead!"

"But, mamma, you know when she was—lost, some of her things disappeared; well, they have been found. They are here," and Maude put the box in her mother's lap.

Lady Thornton's hands nervously emptied it. She shook out the little robe with a smothered cry, and put her hands up to her face.

"Dear mamma, don't give way yet; there is something else to come," whispered Maude.

"Something else! Oh, Maude, don't—don't show it to me! I can't bear it! The sight of these seems to have brought back all the old sorrow. Oh, my child! my precious child!"

"Mamma, it is nothing sorrowful that I have to tell. Look and listen please, mamma—dear mamma!" said Maude, in desperation.

Lady Thornton looked up trembling, while Maude gently broke to her the news that her long-lost child was still alive.

"Not dead!" the mother murmured, bewilderedly gazing at her daughter with wide, wild eyes. "Not dead!—then where is she, my child? Oh, Maude, where is she?"

"Mamma, she is one whom we have both learned to

love, one of whom even papa may be proud," said Maude, earnestly. "Cannot you guess who she is?"

"Not—not Stella?" whispered Lady Thornton.

"Yes, Stella, mamma. Listen while I read this confession to you," and Maude read Margot's confession, and then told her mother of the marks on Stella's shoulder, and of Stella's recognition of the sleeve-clasp at Castle Thornton.

"And how long have you known this, Maude?" asked Lady Thornton.

"Since Christmas, mamma. I would have told you before, only I thought it best not till I had all the proofs to give you. Now I will leave you to realise it while I find my sister."

"Whither away, my fairest of fairy godmothers?" said Duke, meeting her in the corridor.

"Only to look after the result of some of my spells," Maude answered, gaily. "You can come and help weave a fresh one if you like."

"Thanks; I am afraid my fingers are too clumsy for such a delicate operation. But I don't mind looking on."

"Just the sort of work that suits me," joined in Belle's voice, as that young lady opened her door. "May I offer my invaluable assistance in the looking-on department, Dr. Langley?"

"Two are better far than one," quoted Duke. "If I were the overseer who is taking on 'hands,' I should say 'yes.'"

"Out upon you for a pair of lazy drones!" exclaimed Maude. "I wash my hands of the two of you!" And she skimmed lightly away.

"Maude looks a little less like a boiled turnip lately," observed Belle, looking after her; "but still she looks far from well. Why don't you prescribe for her, Dr. Langley?"

"Because, Miss Belle," Duke answered, gravely, "I do not know exactly what to prescribe—I wish I did!"

"Isn't it a physician's first duty to ascertain the nature of the disease?"



"A physician may have a knowledge of the disease, without the power to apply a remedy."

"More's the pity!" responded Belle. "But I very much doubt, Dr. Langley, if you know anything of the disease, let alone the remedy; and I, though I may guess at both, am sadly afraid that the latter is quite beyond our reach; so we may as well confess ourselves a couple of quacks, and throw up the case."

"Do you think it is beyond anybody's reach?" asked Duke, earnestly.

"I am afraid that the one person who holds the remedy will be the last to think of administering it," said Belle, seriously. "I don't know whether I ought to have said as much; but I know you are to be trusted, Dr. Langley." Then she added, with a laugh and a change of tone, "Maude would think that is more than can be said of me, or I shouldn't be here, talking of her affairs, when I ought to be planning how to make myself resplendent for to-night."

"Probably she would also think that there is little need of 'planning' on Miss Belle Ashleigh's part," Duke said; then, as Belle turned away with a sweeping courtesy, he murmured, "Is that it? Poor Maude!"

Maude, who had found Stella, did not look just at that moment as if she needed his pity, for her face was radiant.

"Stella," she was saying, "will you come to mamma's room? She wants you."

"Yes, of course," Stella answered, readily, rising at once; and the two girls went together to Lady Thornton's room.

"You must not be startled," Maude said, as she opened the door; "but mamma is rather agitated. We have found something of yours, which we want to return."

"Something of mine—" Stella was beginning, when she was clasped in Lady Thornton's arms, and Lady Thornton's voice murmured—"My child! my Vestelle! my dear lost child!"

And Stella, taken by surprise at this unexpected greeting, forgetful of everything but that she was,

for the first time within her remembrance, in her mother's arms, nestled there awhile in happy silence. Maude looked at them, her eyes dancing with delight.

"Mamma, I shall be jealous," she said at last. "Stella, haven't you a word for your sister?"

"Are you quite sure I am your sister?" asked Stella, as Lady Thornton partially released her, and still keeping one arm round her, put the other round Maude, and drew both to the sofa.

"Sure? Yes, of course we are. Mr. Cadburn gave me the proofs this morning."

"Proofs!" exclaimed Stella, incautiously. "There are none! I burnt——" She stopped suddenly.

"What do you call these?" and, without appearing to notice that thoughtless half confession, Maude pulled the little heap of "proofs" that lay on the table towards her. "Look at these, and read that; and then we'll have a good talk till luncheon; you must tell us all about your early life—mustn't she, mamma?"

And Stella told them of her childhood, softening the painful details as much as possible, till she came to the time when Duke took pity on her. Lady Thornton shuddered.

"And I never knew it!" she said. "Where was my mother's instinct? My darling selling flowers in the street for a morsel of bread! Oh! I do not think I can ever forgive the woman who was the cause of it!"

"And I," said Maude, gently, "if I had never loved Duke before, should love him for his kindness to my sister, when she was only a little flower-girl."

"And a remarkably ugly one too," said Stella, smiling. "You have no idea what an ugly child I was, Maude."

"There is one thing puzzles me," observed Maude, linking her arm in Stella's, as they passed together out of Lady Thornton's apartment. "Were you ashamed of your relatives, my sister, [that you did not want them to own you?"

"How did you know?" questioned Stella, flushing.

"My dear, don't you know I'm a private detective? How could you do it, Stella? why did you?"

"Because—if I must make a clean breast of it—I did not want to rob you and—and Mr. Marmaduke," confessed Stella.

"Silly little goose!—as if I wouldn't rather have my sister than Thornton! And 'Mr. Marmaduke,' too,—why didn't you ask him if he would like to be 'robbed'? You'll have to get used to calling him 'Duke,' Miss Stella Thornton; because he is a kind of cousin, you know—his mother is papa's step-sister."

"I can't feel that that name belongs to me; I feel in a maze," observed Stella, who was beginning to understand how she had been tricked into burning a copy of Margot's confession, instead of the original, and to feel very glad of it.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Belle, when the news was made public. "Will anybody please to tell me who I am?" With such a general shuffle among the planets, I don't feel inclined to remain plain Belle Ashleigh! Papa, have you got a spare sovereign about you?"

"There's precious little chance of a man having spare sovereigns where you are, you baggage. What do you want it for?"

"Why, I thought we had better invest it in a few volumes of 'Who's Who?' If this game is going on much longer, we shall find 'em uncommonly handy. Will somebody have the goodness to inform me why we couldn't find all this out before?—and, while they're about it, they can let me know why the people who found the drowned child were such muffs as not to look for the marks on her shoulder?"

"Somebody had the goodness" to explain to Miss Ashleigh that the body, when discovered, was so much swollen and discoloured, that any marks upon it, had they been there, must have been indistinguishable—and the young lady graciously declared herself quite satisfied.

At the grand party that evening Stella was introduced anew to society as Miss Thornton; and Maude declared that the way in which people looked at and

talked to her was quite amusing; they seemed to feel not quite sure whether they ought to congratulate or condole with her. With Sir William and Lady Thornton and Stella herself, of course there was no such difficulty, and congratulations fell thick and fast.

"What do you think of the fairy godmother now, Duke?" Maude smilingly asked him, in the course of the evening.

"Think?—why, that Cinderella's godmother is 'nowhere' in comparison."

"Then I hope you will submit to my rule in future, for I mean to hector over my big brother, Duke."

Duke smiled, and said she was welcome, if she ever had one.

"Haven't you settled that I shall have one yet, Duke?"

"Not yet. Maude, I feel more nervous over it now than ever I did."

"You ridiculous creature!—when I told you she would say 'yes' if you would only have patience! Fancy her knowing that she was Stella Thornton, and yet making up her mind to be Stella Martyn all her life, because she would not take Thornton from you and me! She is a noble girl, Duke."

"Indeed, she is," assented Duke. "But, Maude," he added, doubtfully, "if she knew this, she could not have refused me because she thought she was poor—could she?"

"Of course she could, you foolish fellow, when she fancied she had destroyed all proof of her birth. So, because she had done you no good by sacrificing her fortune, she thought she would improve the matter, by sacrificing herself. Silly girl! it's very well the fairies were at work in her interests. Duke, we seem to have been playing a nice little game at cross-purposes; let it end now."

"Where is she?" asked Duke, suddenly.

"She was in the library a few minutes ago, with Colonel Medley."

Duke marched straight off to the library. He found Stella there alone, the colonel having been called awa

by some other person. She looked up at Duke an instant as he entered, then her cheek flushed, and her eyes drooped shyly before his—the look in them telling her even before he spoke what was coming.

“Little girl,” Duke said, “don’t you know what you promised to say when you were my equal in the eyes of the world? You are more than that now, Stella—much more—and the world would not blame you for refusing to say it now; still I love you too well not to ask for those four little words.

“Wait until I have told you something that you ought to know; perhaps you won’t wish me to say it then.”

And, in low tones, and with shame-dropped eyes, Stella told him of her engagement to John Cadburn and its result. When she had finished, for all answer Duke took her in his arms, and, looking down at her glowing face, from which the light did not vanish this time, said—

“Now, darling, those four little words! Try and say them—they are very easy—‘I love you, Duke.’”

But, easy as they were, they were apparently too difficult for Stella, for she did not say them; she only said, “I—I—” and finished with—“How could I help it?”

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### JOHN CADBURN ATTEMPTS TO MAKE MISCHIEF.

JOHN CADBURN’S state of mind, when he heard of Stella’s recognition by her family, baffles description. Close upon that followed the news of her engagement to Duke, and the climax was reached—John foamed with fury.

“To think,” he exclaimed, “that I should have let myself be outwitted like this! that I should have walked straight into the trap!—should have defeated my own ends by the very means I took to obtain

them, and, instead of revenging myself upon her, place her with my own hands in a position to laugh at me for a blundering idiot! Stupid blockhead that I was!"

The small office-boy had a trying time of it that day, and, but for the solace afforded by an enormous stick of candy, at which he contrived to take surreptitious bites, would probably have been driven out of his small wits. As it was, he was not at all sorry when his master took himself and his ill-humour out for a walk.

In the park Mr. Cadburn met Marmaduke Langley. Duke was passing him with a bow, but John accosted him. He had made up his mind that, since he had lost Stella, nobody else should have her, if he could prevent it.

"I suppose," John began, "I ought to offer you my congratulations, Dr. Langley; and if I could do so with a clear conscience, I would."

"Thank you just the same, Mr. Cadburn."

"You have nothing to thank me for, Dr. Langley. I do not think it a matter for congratulation—in fact, I am very sorry for you; and you will probably soon regret the step you have taken."

"Hardly that, I fancy," returned Duke, easily. "However, if I do, I must put up with it. Good morning, Mr. Cadburn."

"You would not care, then, for the fact that the young lady is at this moment engaged to another?" questioned John, with a sneer.

"Probably I should care if that were a fact, Mr. Cadburn," Duke answered, quietly. "But I am not likely to believe it; nor shall I listen to any insinuations against Miss Thornton."

"Miss Thornton?—Oh, yes; I forgot! But it is quite true, Dr. Langley. The young lady who is now, I hear, betrothed to you, was—less than a year ago—engaged to me; but when I went away from Cleighton, not liking the idea of an absent lover, I suppose, she changed her mind—and if she had told me so honourably, it wouldn't have been so bad! But she didn't;

instead of that, she treated me with contempt; she left my letters unnoticed; and when I saw her again, she would not even speak to me—would not even deign to give me an explanation of her conduct,” said John, with a bitter laugh. “That is why I don’t congratulate you, Dr. Langley! How do you know that she won’t get tired of you soon, and treat you in a similar fashion?”

“If what you say is true, Mr. Cadburn, there must have been some mistake somewhere, for which Stella is not responsible. She received no letters from you——”

“Oh! so I am too late, am I? She has forestalled me, and made her own side good. That tale may do for you, Dr. Langley, but it won’t do for me.”

And, turning on his heel, John strode away, enraged beyond measure that he had failed in his manly design of sowing discord between Stella and her lover.

“Little girl,” Duke said to Stella, that night, “I am very glad you told me what you did the other evening; if you hadn’t I should have had a terrible blow to-day. But as it is, I am really sorry for that poor fellow. His letters must have miscarried somehow.”

“I cannot understand it,” was all Stella said. But privately she did not believe a word of the story; she believed it was got up on purpose to injure her in Duke’s estimation.

Sir William Thornton grumbled a little when he was asked for his sanction to his newly discovered daughter’s engagement, but gave it nevertheless. She might do a great deal better, he told his wife in confidence, and it was extremely foolish of her to wish to throw herself away in that fashion; but he did not care so much, as long as the fellow did not want his beautiful, peerless Maude. For of course Maude was his favourite child; it wasn’t to be expected of him, though he liked her very much, that he should be as fond of the daughter he had not seen for more than a dozen years as he was of the one who had grown up under his eye, and been the pet and pride of his blue-

blooded heart ; and it really seemed a pity that Maude was not the elder, and Stella the younger daughter.

Those being the stately baronet's sentiments, he vouchsafed a conditional consent to the engagement.

"But as it is possible that Vestelle"—everybody else continued to call her Stella—"may change her mind, when she sees more of the world—indeed, Vestelle, it is very likely ; none of you seem to know your own minds long together—I shall take my wife and daughters abroad for a year, after a short visit to Thornton. If, at the end of that time, you both remain in the same mind, I shall be willing for the marriage to take place. You cannot object to that, Marmaduke, as you say you do not wish to be married until you have some prospect of keeping a wife respectably, independently of her fortune ; and allow me to say, I consider that a very proper and prudent resolution. By that time you will be settled in your new practice, and get some idea of what you are likely to do."

"The only thing that I see at all objectionable in your plan, Sir William, is, that I shall not see Stella for twelve months. That does seem rather a hard measure."

"It is a measure that will test her affection for you, and it will give her an opportunity of improving herself. And, except on those terms, I will not sanction the engagement."

After which, of course there was nothing left for them but to submit.

Before the Thorntons left Helstone, Gaspar's testimony respecting his wife's abduction of Stella was obtained—the hope of a reward inducing him to tell the truth—and it corroborated Margot's story ; Gaspar adding, that he always thought it was a foolhardy piece of business, and that he had often had "a good mind to split on the old woman, but somehow he didn't." And then Gaspar pocketed his reward, and took himself off to his haunt in the Apennines.

A few days afterwards the guests left the Priory. Katrina had disappeared the day after the trial. She



engaged lodgings near the gaol where her husband was confined for a short time, previous to transportation, and where she visited him every day. Ludovico professed extreme penitence for his treatment of her, declaring that nothing but the exigency of the case could ever have made him act so; and Katrina was happy again—that is, as happy as she could be with her lord in durance vile—and listened eagerly and intelligently to his plan for escape, and implicitly obeyed his instructions—the consequence being that, a few days previous to the one fixed for his removal to the convict-ship, Ludovico bade farewell to his cell, and joined his loyal slave outside the prison walls, where she waited with the money her husband had secreted, and which he had given her directions to secure.

They made good their escape to their mountain home, where Ludovico resumed his former mode of life, and became a terror to the whole region, until the gang having perpetrated a crime of unusual atrocity, the Italian Government despatched a strong military force to disband it. In the *mêlée* both Ludovico and Gaspar lost their lives; and the widowed Katrina hid herself and her grief in a convent, where she spends her time praying for the repose of her husband's soul.

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### HEART-WOUNDS HEALED.

SOON after the Thorntons left England, an excellent London practice was in the market, and Sir Edward Langley, acting on private instructions received from Stella before her departure, purchased it for Duke, with the understanding that the money was to be repaid as soon as possible, for on no other terms would Duke accept it.

To him the twelve months' waiting was a dreary

time; to Stella, amid the novelty and excitement of foreign travel, it passed more rapidly.

In Germany the Thorntons met Count Sadseldorf, and the old intimacy was speedily renewed. Vladimir seemed somewhat graver and steadier than of yore, but he was a no less agreeable companion for the change. He met Stella without embarrassment, and congratulated her on her engagement in a frank, brotherly manner that did much to reassure her with respect to her part in the past, and told her that the wound she had inflicted was not incurable. During the rest of their tour Vladimir accompanied them; and he accepted an invitation to return to England with them for the wedding, and be one of Duke's groomsmen.

"Count Sadseldorf is very much improved; don't you think so, Maude?" Stella remarked, one day towards the end of the year's probation.

"What do you suppose Duke would think if he heard you say that?" parried Maude.

"Think! why, just as I do," returned Stella, mischievously: "that two people of my acquaintance seem to be taking a great fancy to each other; and, like me, he would be very glad of it. Maude, I should so like to have Count Vladimir for a brother!"

"A great many people would like a great many things that they have to do without," rejoined Maude, oracularly, with a heightened colour.

"True; but, Maude, I really think——"

But Maude had vanished, and Stella saw no more of her for some hours. When she appeared again, the colour was deeper than ever. She came up behind Stella's chair, and whispered,—

"Stella, dear, I have seen Count Sadseldorf, and—and you are to have your wish!"

Stella sprang round, and kissed the crimson cheeks.

"Oh, Maude, I am so glad!" she cried warmly. "And how pleased papa and mamma will be! they like him so much, you know."

"Papa and mamma" were very much pleased, Sir William conceding that it was "a highly satisfactory arrangement; just what he could have wished for his

dear daughter." Lady Thornton's pleasure at the "highly satisfactory arrangement" was slightly damped by the reflection that it would take their darling Maude so far away from them. That defect in it, however, was partially remedied by Vladimir's promise to bring her to Thornton for several months every year.

It was settled that the sisters should be married on the same day, and a magnificent *trousseau* for each was ordered in Paris. The eminent firm to whom the order was given received a similar one from England a few days later—Miss Ashleigh having made up her mind to entrust her mercurial self to the guardianship of the grave, earnest-faced Rector of Thornton.

"Belle Ashleigh marry a parson! Impossible!" exclaimed Stella, when the news reached them.

"She will make an excellent parson's wife, when she settles down a little," said Maude, with a smile. "There never was a better-hearted girl than Belle."

The first week in May was fixed upon for the double wedding, and early in April the Thorntons, accompanied by Vladimir, found themselves once more at Castle Thornton. Belle was there to receive them.

"I don't wonder at your hardly believing your ears," Miss Belle confessed, when the three girls were alone that night in Maude's room. "I hardly believed my own ears when he asked me, or my tongue when it said 'yes.' But you see he's the only fellow that can manage me when I'm outrageous; and so I told him, if I must have a keeper, I'd as lieve have him as anybody. Such a job as I've had to talk the pater into it though. He was in a beast of a temper over it at first. Poor old dad! I've kept him in a state of chronic aggravation ever since I've been any size at all. He used to be aggravated because I wouldn't be married, and now he's awfully aggravated because I will; it's shockingly inconsistent of him, I tell him, but he's getting over it a bit, and by-and-by he'll be in a proper frame of mind for the 'consent and blessing' stage."

"Probably the great body of ministers will think it a matter for self-congratulation that Miss Ashleigh has changed her mind respecting them," said Stella, laughing.

"Bless the girl, I haven't! I'll stick to my colours while there's a rag left. I only think there may be a few exceptions to the rule, and that I've picked up the very best of 'em. The candour of the creature is something astonishing, though," Belle went on, meditatively. "I tell him I'm as full of faults as the sea is full of water, and he says he knows I am, but he believes they're only faults of the head, and not of the heart, and that time will cure me of the worst of 'em; or else if he hadn't thought that, he couldn't have reconciled it to his conscience—fancy a parson with a conscience—to ask me to marry him, though he was awfully fond of me. There was a compliment,—as if I were a heathen or a Hottentot!"

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There is no need to describe the grand double wedding and its accompaniments—the white satin and lace, the favours, the orange blossoms, the *recherche* breakfast, the speeches—everybody knows just what it was like, for grand weddings are very much alike, and probably everybody has witnessed a similar one.

Not only the little church, but the churchyard was crammed with spectators; for, apart from the interest felt in the two fair young brides, the ceremony had another attraction for the simple village folk—it was performed by a real live bishop, assisted by the young rector, who, it was noticed, seemed rather nervous. Perhaps he was thinking of another ceremony of a similar character that was to come off next month, in which he and the curly-headed, blue-eyed chief bridesmaid were to take less subordinate parts.

Neither of the young people having any desire for travel, they agreed to dispense with the regulation wedding-tour, and spend part of the honeymoon at Thornton, after which Vladimir and Maude went to their estate in Russia, and Stella and Duke to the Langleys' old house in London, which Sir William had purchased and presented, elegantly furnished, to the young couple as his wedding gift, where Mrs. Mason, to her great delight, was again installed as housekeeper to "our branch of the family."

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## MISS LYNNE MAKES UP HER MIND TO "TELL."

"DUKE, I want to tell you something," Stella said, one afternoon, about a week after they were settled in their new home.

"Then why don't you?" laughed Duke.

"Because I hardly know whether I dare."

"Dear me! then it is something serious; but I think you dare!" and smilingly passing his arm around her waist, Duke drew her to a seat beside him. "Well, what is it? Have you heard from the Academy that your picture is a failure? Quite the contrary! Then I must guess again. Has my little wife been committing some crime that she dare not confess?"

"Not in her own opinion; but you know Dr. Langley is so extremely proud——"

"Of his wife," put in Duke; "and well he may be."

"I shall have to add, 'and extremely foolish,' if you talk like that. But, Duke, what I want to say is, you don't owe Sir Edward Langley anything."

"No! How came you to know so much about my business, young lady? and how do you happen to know that I ever did owe Sir Edward Langley anything?"

"I don't," said Stella, reassured by his tone. "So far from that, indeed, I know that you never did."

"Indeed! that is more than I know myself," rejoined Duke, more gravely. "What do you mean, little girl?"

"Only that I wanted very much to do something for you, and I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind if I did it instead of Sir Edward."

Duke was silent a moment. Stella watched his face anxiously till it was turned to her again with a smile.

"You were right, dear," he said. "It will be pleasanter to owe it to my wife than to anybody else—even Edward."

"Oh, Duke, please don't talk of 'owing' anything to me after all you have done for me, when it is I who owe everything to you. But for you, what should I be now? I don't know—I shudder to think what I might have been."

"I don't know what you might have been," rejoined Duke; "but I know what you wouldn't have been: you wouldn't have been my precious wife. How little I thought then, that that little shivering, sobbing creature was to be my wife! While befriending you, dear, I was unconsciously 'casting bread upon the waters,' and it has come back to me in such a rich and plenteous harvest, that sometimes I am half tempted to fear lest it should not last—I don't deserve that it should!"

"Nor I," said Stella; adding, half timidly, "But we are not in the care of one who measures His gifts by our deserts, Duke."

"No, little wife—or I should have very little faith in my future. Hark! what is that?" as a shrill cry came from the street. "An accident—I must see what is the matter;" and Duke sprang to the door.

A knot of people had gathered outside.

"A woman run over, sir," one of them explained. "We've got her away from the horse's feet, but she's fainted."

"Poor thing!" said Duke. "Bring her in here, my men; I will attend to her. I am a physician."

The limp, inanimate burden was brought in and placed on a sofa; and Stella, who was hastening to apply restoratives, exclaimed, as her eye fell upon the white face,—

"Why, Duke, it is Sarah Lynne! but I forgot, you don't know her. Do you think she is seriously hurt?"

"I am afraid she is," answered Duke, gravely. "Do you know whether she lives in London, Stella?"

"She didn't when we were at school; probably she is only in town on a visit. If she is much injured, she ought not to be moved, Duke; we must keep her here till we can find out where her friends are, and communicate with them—don't you think so?"

"It will be best," assented Duke.

Sarah was gently conveyed upstairs and placed in bed ; and Stella's own hands ministered to her wants, and held her while Duke set the dislocated shoulder and the broken leg, during which operation Miss Lynne's screams rang through the house, till another fainting-fit came on—the beginning of a dangerous illness that lasted for several weeks, through which Stella nursed her as tenderly as if there had never been any unpleasantness between them in the past.

The fever passed off at last, but it left her very weak, and Duke had very little hope of her ultimate recovery.

"Shall I die?" Sarah asked, abruptly, one day.

Duke hesitated, and then told her as gently as possible what his real opinion was. She received the news with wild horror and despair.

"Are you sure?" she said, presently. "Because, if I was sure I should die, I've got something to say ; but I wouldn't say it for the world, if I thought I should get better."

"If it is anything that ought to be said—anything of consequence, Miss Lynne, I advise you to say it," said Duke, gravely. "There is a slight—a very slight chance of your recovery ; but it will be very unwise, not to say wrong, to trust to it."

"Well, I'll wait till to-morrow," Sarah decided, after a moment's consideration. "If I'm worse to-morrow, I'll tell."

She was a great deal "worse to-morrow ;" so she resolved to "tell."

"You must send for John Cadburn, if you know where he is," she announced. "I want to see him."

"John Cadburn? I don't think he will come here," said Stella. "However, he shall be sent for."

But to Stella's surprise, he answered the telegram in person by the next train. He was ushered into the sick-room, where were Sarah's parents, Stella, and Duke, who had just come in from his morning's round of visits. Sarah winced as John came up to the bed and said—

"I am very sorry to see you so ill, Miss Lynne. Can

I do anything for you?—you wished to see me, I understand.”

“Yes, because they say I’m going to die, and I daren’t if I didn’t tell! It’s about you and Stella Martyn. I used to like her very well till she made me tell about that brandy—she knows what I mean, if you don’t—but after that I hated her, and I’d have done anything to spite her for it. But I didn’t get any chance to hurt her much till you came after her, and then I thought my time was come. I knew she didn’t care much for you at first; but I encouraged you to think she did, because I wanted her to, and I thought perhaps if you persevered she would. I wanted her to fall in love with you and accept you—and then, even if you had stayed at Cleighton, I should have found some way to make you break off with her and leave her to fret about it. But you went away, and that made things very easy for me. I watched for the postman every day, and got the letters that you sent to her, and kept them. She caught me reading one of them once; and I told her that you had written to me—it did my heart good to see how aggravated she was! And that Sunday that you came back, you know, I saw you after chapel; and I told you that she had had your letters all right and burnt them, and that she said she would never speak to you again—so she did, but it was because she thought you had treated her badly. I pretended to sympathise with you when you said hard things against her, and made you think a good deal worse of her than you would have done. And just before I went indoors, you know, we saw her standing at one of the windows, and you kissed me, just on purpose to aggravate her. That helped me out finely in the story I told her: that you and I were engaged, and that you said you had liked me best all along. But she didn’t seem to care about it so much as I wanted her to; and the very next day she got up among a lot of grand people that wouldn’t even have looked at me! and there she’s been ever since, I suppose. There now, I’ve told it! and when you’ve all forgiven me, perhaps



"I can get ready to die," concluded Miss Lynne, her tone intimating that, now she had confessed her share in the injury, the injured parties could not, of course, have any objection to extend instant forgiveness to her. John Cadburn, however, took another view of the case.

"Forgive you!" he said, bitterly. "I can't forgive you—I never shall!"

"And won't you forgive me either?" Sarah asked, turning to Stella.

It had been very hard work, that confession, and nothing but the fear of death would have induced her to make it.

"Yes, I forgive you, Sarah," Stella assured her. "Unconsciously you did me the greatest kindness that you could possibly have done; you averted the consequences of my own folly—consequences that would have been infinitely more painful than the mortification I endured for a little while. But you, Mr. Cadburn"—and Stella turned to the young man and held out her hand—"what must you have thought of me all this time? I hope you will forgive me for my subsequent treatment of you—believe me, I sincerely regret it."

"Forgive you!" murmured John. "Yes, but how can I forgive myself? How can you ever forgive me?—for I have injured you—or tried to, at least—worse than she ever could!" and he glanced at Sarah.

"Not so," said Stella, with a smile; "for if you had returned that box to me unopened, it would have remained so till my twenty-first birthday—probably longer, for I should have been in no hurry to open it—and I should now be only Stella Martyn, a poor governess, instead of Sir William Thornton's daughter, and——" She stopped suddenly, remembering that it must pain John Cadburn to be reminded that she was now Marmaduke Langley's wife; but an eloquent glance at Duke finished the sentence.

Duke smiled down into the luminous gray eyes, and drew her from the room and downstairs into the pleasant sitting-room.

"I can't have my little wife monopolised in this fashion," he said. "The green-eyed monster will be aroused presently, for aught I know. See here, what I brought you!" and he showed her a tiny rose-bush, loaded with half-opened buds.

"Oh, Duke! how beautiful!" cried Stella.

"So I thought," said Duke, picking one of the flowers and fastening it in her hair. "The only improvement I can suggest is, that I should break the stems off every one of the buds."

"Break the stems!" began Stella, horrified; then, understanding, she said, softly, "I shall always love roses, Duke!"

"And so shall I," he answered.

\* \* \* \*

Miss Lynne did not die. As if the dose of humiliation she had swallowed were a powerful tonic, she began to mend almost immediately; and if Stella had wished to inflict any punishment upon her, she could not have chosen one more severe than the mortification Sarah felt that she had divulged her secret. Her illness, besides leaving behind it a slight lameness, failed to improve her in any respect. She is still unmarried, and to all appearance likely to remain so—a fact which does not render her a whit more amiable.

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Lord Aylesmere has aged considerably since his marriage—he looks old, and worn, and weary. He has long realised that his marriage was a false step, and that he must expect neither sympathy nor companionship in his tastes and pursuits from his gay young wife, for Sybil speedily threw off the deceptive mask and exhibited her real character. After the first few weeks, she dropped all pretence of affection for her husband—having secured her prize, it was too much trouble to keep it up. She flirted openly before his eyes, and when he remonstrated, tauntingly asked him what he supposed she married him for, if she was to be mewed up and not be allowed to enjoy herself.

"I supposed, Sybil, that you married me because you

loved me," he answered, with dignity, on one of those occasions.

"Really," her ladyship said, with a slight laugh and a contemptuous shrug of her white shoulders, "the vanity of an old man is something remarkable!"

After that, Lady Aylesmere was troubled with no more remonstrances from her husband. He supplies her with the means of indulging her own extravagant tastes, and allows her to go her own way, unchecked; while he himself, having withdrawn almost entirely from society, seeks solace in his library, and in plans for the improvement of his estate and the condition of his tenants.

John Cadburn is still in business at Helstone. He is married, but report says that he is not the kindest of husbands to his meek little wife.

At Helstone Priory, Mr Grantham has a suite of rooms, and attendants devoted to him exclusively—an arrangement with which the future Lady Langley, the youngest of Mr. Barton's blooming daughters, is not at all likely to interfere.

Belle is a great favourite with her husband's parishioners, who think her a model clergyman's wife, with her kindly heart, her pretty face, and lively speeches; she is worth a dozen ordinary minister's wives, they say; and her husband is quite of their opinion.

"Cousin Tom" was groomsman at her wedding; so far recovered from the wounds inflicted by Sybil's charms as to be very attentive to one of the bridesmaids—so attentive, that the young lady is now Mrs. Tom Melville.

Sir William and Lady Thornton are still living, and there is an annual reunion at Castle Thornton, on the two last of which occasions the grandpapas and grand-mammas—to say nothing of the papas and mammas—found a fruitful subject for discussion in the various perfections of Miss Stella Martyn Sadseldorf, Master Vladimir Ashleigh Moreton, and Miss Alice Jesson Langley.

The last-mentioned young lady, who, as far as can at present be ascertained, seems with the blue eyes and

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